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Fret Not; It's Good: Sue Henry's Final Days

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Abstract

Fret Not; It's Good: Sue Henry's Final Days
By Katherine Stephens

This honors thesis in American Studies is a form of a woman's life history and memoir. The subject is Sue McLaurin Henry, a camp director in Mentone, Alabama, the story of her last two weeks of life, and what that time revealed about the rest of her life. During the last two weeks of Sue Henry's life, I was compelled to turn on a recorder to capture some of our conversations and those of others in the community of women who were caring for her. I worked with roughly twenty-two hours of recordings. Several short transcribed segments of these conversations are presented within the text of the paper. The chapters of this thesis are organized around three scenes from Sue Henry's last days. The first is a good-bye with an old friend who had come to visit Sue in her hospital room in Jackson, MS; the second takes place in Henry's cabin in Mentone, AL, where her sister, my aunt and my cousin were caring for her with the help of Hospice; and the third is an informal worship service we held on the last Sunday of her life sitting around her bed.

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In her diary in 1929, Virginia Woolf anticipated the reception of *A Room of One's Own:*

"I am afraid it will not be taken seriously…It is a trifle, I shall say; so it is, but I wrote it with ardor and conviction."

INTRODUCTION

On June 3, 2009, I was in Mentone, Alabama, caring for Sue Henry, my godmother, who was dying of cancer, when I received this email from my brother John who was working in South Africa for the summer:

> *Hi Kate,*
> *Mom tells me you are caring for Sue. It's incredibly comforting to know that you are with her, though I'm sure it cannot be an easy task. It is a work of love, the stuff of family. I'm sure you handle it with grace. Write it down, I'm sure you won't be the same for it. I'd like to hear a little of what is going on if you have a chance…*
> *Love you—John*

Sue died the next day. My brother was right; I am not the same for it. In my senior thesis, I attempt to tell you a little of what went on. Furthermore, I work to understand it.

Assumptions

My thesis is a form of a woman's life history and memoir. My subject is Sue McLaurin Henry, the story of her last few weeks of life, and what that time revealed about the rest of her life. It operates out of two main assumptions: that some knowledge might be gleaned from reflecting on death, and that some wisdom might be gained by understanding Sue Henry. I posit that dying well is a lesson that can be taught. Sue chose to teach the lesson of dying well in her final days and my thesis is an effort to learn that lesson.

Raised in the Delta

Sue Henry was born in 1930 in Rosedale, Mississippi.

Sue was thirteen years old when her father died. He was a plantation manager at the time. Sue and her mother returned from the grocery store one day and found Sue's father dead of a stroke. When the funeral was paid for, the Henry family had $58.00 in the bank. Within weeks of her husband's death, Mrs. Henry had sold the family car and moved with her two daughters into an apartment in the small town of Rosedale, Mississippi, where she had just recently taken a job as postmistress.

In 2000, Sue wrote, "I was born seventy years ago in the Mississippi Delta, and I was raised by parents who were probably described as poor by some of their friends, but I was an adult before I understood

From left to right: Sue's brother Doc, sister Anne, and Sue

the extent of their struggles…We lived in the country and our family was a happy, secure group."[1]

Sue's sister, Anne, who is three years older than Sue, soon went on to junior college for business. Her brother, Doc, was eighteen years old and was on a naval ship in the Pacific. It was the last months of World War II, and Doc didn't learn of his father's death until several months after it occurred. Despite their family's struggles as a landless family during the Depression in the Mississippi Delta, the loss of Sue's well-loved father, and the even greater financial insecurity of a single woman in postwar Mississippi, Sue's mother was able to provide tremendous security for her family. Sue graduated from Rosedale High School, and went on to study English and to graduate from Mississippi State College for Women.

As a freshman at MSCW in 1948, Sue began working as a counselor at Camp DeSoto, an all-girls Christian camp in Mentone, Alabama, owned and run by Norma C. Bradshaw and Bess Herron, two single Mississippi women.[2] After graduating from college, Sue spent the next

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[1] Sue Henry, "Min. of Money" (2000).

[2] "Camp DeSoto is a month-long, traditional summer camp for girls providing the rich experience of camping in the context of a Christian community. We are located in northern Alabama in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. Nestled among 185 acres of woods on the crest of Lookout Mountain, we enjoy warm summer days and cool summer nights.

Girls ages 8 to 16 come to Camp for a month each summer to play together, learn from each other, and grow in their relationships with Christ and others. Campers live in cabins with girls in their same school grade and participate in a broad range of camp activities, from athletics to arts and everything in between.

Camp DeSoto seeks to nurture girls physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually under the guidance and direction of college-age counselors who have been selected on the basis of their ability to lead, love, guide, and care for campers.

Mission statement: There are so many things we want to give girls camping at DeSoto. We hope campers will play and have fun in the truest and best sense. We hope they will experience the give and take involved in working together for the good of the group, as well as

twenty years teaching English during the school year and working at Camp DeSoto during her summers. She taught at leading girls' schools throughout the southeast, and was increasingly involved in administration both at her schools and at Camp.[3] Ultimately, she found she had to choose between the two. In 1972, she joined Camp DeSoto's full-time, year-round staff, and in 1978, Sue bought Camp DeSoto from Bess and Brad.[4]

Sue's Chosen Family

It was during this time that my mother, Jane Thompson Stephens, met Sue. My mother was a junior at Vanderbilt University, and Sue had come to her campus to interview students for positions on Camp DeSoto's summer staff. My mother, Jane, and her sister, Jean Thompson Corey, worked at Camp DeSoto for many summers after that. Their own mother died when my mother was sixteen years old and my aunt Jean was thirteen years old. Sue was born in the same year as my grandmother, but never married or had children. To an extent, their respective ages allowed Sue and the Thompson sisters to fill in the gaps of mother and daughters. Their

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the joy of daily tasks and daily play. We want girls to know the safety of a loving environment. And, we want to offer them a place to succeed and to fail, knowing both are good teachers. We hope that time at Camp will help girls become better at responding to the difficult experiences that are an inevitable part of life. We want girls to grow in their own independence, and to develop in their understanding and appreciation of who they are. We want girls to become aware of their gifts and sense the joy in giving them to the cabin or the community. More than anything, we want girls camping at DeSoto to be confident of God's love for them as individuals, and to personally respond to His love, appreciating anew the privilege of worshipping their Creator." (http://www.campdesoto.com/)

[3] The schools where Sue taught include Ashley Hall in Charleston, South Carolina; Chatham Hall in Chatham, Virginia; and Lausanne School in Memphis, Tennessee.

[4] Norma Flora Cox and Norma Bradshaw Flora, *Camp DeSoto: A History* (Memphis: Well Writers Guide, 2004), 45.

relationship lasted for thirty-five years, with Sue becoming became a grandmother or godmother for my mother and aunt's collective twelve children, including me.

After directing Camp for seventeen years, Sue sold Camp DeSoto and passed on its leadership to Phil and Marsha Hurt, a younger married couple, in 1995. Sue had mentored Phil when he was a year-round staff member at DeSoto's brother camp, and when he married Marsha, the Hurt family became the third limb in Sue's extended adopted family. When she died, the Stephens, Coreys and Hurts were the primary benefactors in her will, as they had been in her life.

Sue with ten of her fifteen godchildren (Corey, Hurt, and Stephens families)

After retiring from Camp DeSoto at 60, Sue went on to spend her summers as a volunteer in safe houses for vulnerable women and children in rural Kentucky with the Christian Appalachian

Project (CAP). [5] It was through CAP that she met Mary McNamara, a young woman who ultimately became a vital member of Sue's growing extended family. Mary's age put her somewhere between the children (Jane, Jean and Phil) and the godchildren, and her background from a blue-collar Irish family in Cleveland, Ohio, stretched the borders of Sue's own Mississippi Baptist origins even further.

Four Weeks

Sue died in Mentone, Alabama in 2009. In May of 2009, Sue drove seven hours to visit her sister, Anne, in Jackson, Mississippi. She felt healthy when she left her home, but she started feeling pain in her leg when she arrived in Jackson. She went to the hospital and was diagnosed with kidney cancer. Sue died four weeks later. She was in Jackson, Mississippi for the first three weeks and she was able to return to her home in Mentone, Alabama for the last week of her life.

I had the privilege of being with Sue during the final two weeks of her life. I was compelled to turn on a recorder to capture some of our conversations. I have roughly twenty-two hours of recordings, including some long periods without any conversation as I occasionally simply left the recorder running. I use transcriptions of less than an hour of various sections of these recordings within my thesis to provide a sense of the conversation during Sue's death. At times, I include audio clips from the recordings. I have chosen three conversations to illuminate: one from her third week (my first week) in the hospital, one from our last week on the mountain

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[5] "Christian Appalachian Project is a Kentucky-based, interdenominational, non-profit Christian organization "committed to serving people in need in Appalachia by providing physical, spiritual and emotional support through a wide variety of programs and services." As the 15th largest human services charity in the nation, Christian Appalachian Project (CAP) has been committed to improving the lives of Appalachian residents since 1964." (http://www.christianapp.org/about/)

in Sue's log cabin home in Mentone, and one from a church service we held in her bedroom five days before she died. I chose these scenes from among the twenty-two hours of recordings from those weeks and others might have worked as well, but these seemed to show the vivid dimensions of thoughtfulness, caregiving, and spirit that we experienced throughout her final weeks. The first scene shows Sue being with a friend, the next shows her being in community, and the final scene shows her being with God. Throughout the transcriptions, I interrupt with memories from the last two weeks of Sue's life and reflections on the rest of her life.

As I listened to the recordings and looked back through the emails from that time, the process of being present to the actual recordings and documents initially made it all harder to write about Sue's death, maybe even to think about it. I had thought I remembered things one way, and through the recordings, I seemed to have proof that they happened differently. My confidence that I even knew what I knew was shaken.

Remembering

The only thing that I could actually remember from my first few moments with Sue when I first saw her in her hospital bed in the Jackson hospital was my own awkwardness, or was it helplessness? I don't know if that's what it was, but I certainly felt an uneasiness when I first saw her. I walked into her hospital room and saw the oxygen mask on her face. I was so afraid she wouldn't know who I was. She was nearly unrecognizable to me at first glance. Sue was too grand to me to be restrained by something physical. The physical seemed trivial compared to her. She didn't fit into what I saw before me. That was until she spoke. Her voice was always hers and hers alone.

I suppose she could have done without a body, and less than a month later she did as she had chosen to be cremated. She never seemed to be too attached to it. But her voice is timeless, eternal. It's with us now in these recordings. And her voice brought me back to her that day in the hospital room.

I imagined that she started with something like "Oh, Kate, come over here." I was so uncomfortable walking over to hug her, trying to navigate the cords and observe the machines all while being terribly afraid of hurting her. But she had such ease about her. She hosted me gracefully. I wrote this in a letter to my friends five days after she died:

> The first thing she told me when I arrived at the hospital in Jackson was, "Now Kate, you're nowhere near looking at the end, but you know, it's *good*." And she kept on being amazed with how good life was and sharing that with us and everyone who entered the room…Later she said, "Miracles have happened, I loved so many people."[6]

Whether or not I had been in the hospital room or at Sue's cabin with her when she died, her life and death would have been of great interest to a considerable number of people whose lives she touched and whose spirits she moved. I turned on the tape recorder during those days, because I knew many people would have wanted to be in my seat present to the final days of a great woman.

Perspectives and Sources

The research on death and bereavement is characterized by an interdisciplinary quality, and multiple genres or disciplines are often integrated into the work of writers who are more disciplinary in their approach to other subjects. Researchers working in the field of psychology often open chapters of their otherwise academic works with a poem; scientific work on the

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[6] See Appendix.

subject is often embedded with literary examples; and literary scholars allude to art or architecture in their explanations. This interdisciplinary approach within the various literatures illuminates the complexity of death as a subject and the necessity of using a wide variety of approaches in any study of it. Beyond the use of a variety of disciplinary lenses, my thesis utilizes a range of research and textual tools: written text, audio clips, personal reflection and imagery to grapple with the complexities of dying.

In the area of psychology, I have drawn from the work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. In *On Death and Dying,* Kübler-Ross articulates the importance of studying the process of dying; she writes, "I believe that we should make it a habit to think about death and dying occasionally, I hope before we encounter it in our own life."[7] Ross encourages us to sit close to death in order to cultivate an awareness of our finality. An increased awareness of our finality will ultimately create a more humane society as we come to place more value on life—our own and that of others.

Catherine M. Sanders makes a claim in *Grief: The Mourning After* that is in line with Kübler-Ross's call for reflection on death. She writes, "Grief teaches us that there is much to know about ourselves and our world, but that kind of knowledge requires a slower perception."[8] These larger, humanitarian concerns that Kübler-Ross and Sanders bring to bear on the study of death are in keeping with my own expectations that even in her death, Sue has given us an opportunity to understand life more fully.

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[7] Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying (Scribner Classics)* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 26.

[8] Catherine M. Sanders, *Grief: The Mourning After: Dealing with Adult Bereavement, 2nd Edition*, 2 ed. (New York: Wiley, 1998), 281.

Much of my understanding of this process has been guided by literary works; a number of writers have helped me to navigate "human experience in all of its complexity."[9] I've found models in the works of authors such as James Boswell, Alfred Tennyson, Mitch Albom, Virginia Woolf, and C.S. Lewis, but when choosing sources to anchor my own observations, I have privileged the works referenced within Sue's notes or talks with special emphasis on the poetry she selected to teach as an activity at Camp DeSoto. In particular, I have leaned on the work of one of her favorite poets, Emily Dickinson, in an effort to explore the ways Sue's choices in literature reflected her character.

Though a study of the historical factors that shape and are shaped by a woman such as Sue, whose life spanned such an arc of change and intersected with such a variety of individuals and communities would require its own thesis, I did spend a good amount of time reading through the documents in her estate with an eye to understanding the distinctive lens she brought to so much of her reading, teaching, and conversation. I sought to understand how the particulars of her upbringing in Mississippi, her growth as a student and an educator in progressive prep schools across the southeast during the 60s and 70s, her career as a single woman and business owner in Alabama in the 70s and 80s, and her work as a volunteer in a Catholic relief agency in rural Kentucky in the 90s shaped her stance at the time of her death on issues such as politics, race, gender, and sexuality. So much of Sue was shaped by eras and issues that she'd lived through long before I met her that simply to read Sue well during this project encouraged me to think about the events of her life in their historical context.

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[9] Allen F. Repko, ed., *Interdisciplinary Research: Process and Theory* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, Inc, 2008), 92.

From the field of women's studies, I have relied heavily upon the pioneering works and psychological and social theories found in Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* and authors Mart Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule's *Women's Ways of Knowing.* These works helped me to understand Sue's use of voice and the conversational styles within my recordings.

My thesis is written in a nontraditional form, somewhere between a woman's life story and a memoir. I have located my argument for the structure of my paper primarily within the arguments of Mary Catherine Bateson in *Composing A Life* and Linda Wagner-Martin in *Telling Women's Lives: The New Biography*. In her chapter "Taking Control of Story: Women's Voices," Wagner-Martin writes, "One of the reasons daughters' biographies of mothers may be problematic is that a subjective, or loving, or personal, tone strikes some as unprofessional." She goes on to describe typical characteristics of traditional biography and what is perceived as "appropriate detachment." She then highlights the ways that this kind of detachment might work against the strengths and traditions of women's life histories and concludes that, "The point of view of the narrator may be one of the most significant elements in shaping a more responsive approach to shaping women's lives. Observing women's lives may require a different kind of sensitivity, an eye for different kinds of details." [10]

Contemplating Wagner-Martin's assertion, I wish to make explicit my own position: I believe to attempt to fully distance myself from material that I am so inevitably close to, or to somehow embrace a pretense of absolute objectivity, would make for an impossible ambition and would only serve to diminish any insight I might have. Initially, I imagined this piece would

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[10] Linda Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women's Lives: The New Biography* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 111-112.

closely resemble a life history. Throughout the process of writing, my voice as the narrator has grown louder and exposed both my own motivations and the work's ensuing form. My first motivation was to let people know and remember Sue Henry. Before I began the work, I hadn't realized the power of the second motivation: I needed to grieve her for myself. For this reason, my thesis has come to resemble a memoir more than a life history.

A Memoir

The literary tradition for writing a memoir about the loss of a loved one is old and venerated. When we are in love, we write ballads and lyrical poems; when we are in church, we sing psalms and hymns; when we are in grief, we write memoirs. Any of these traditions may be written with a sensibility or with language that makes them meaningful only to the writer or his or her immediate context, or they may be written in a way or for a context that renders them memorable and gives them a readership beyond those who share the context of the writer. When this happens, it may be the result of a thoughtful writer who has chosen an already well-known or highly-esteemed subject, as in the case of James Boswell's biography of Samuel Johnson or, more recently, as in the case of Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie.* But Sue was great in such a different way than any of the other subjects of biography I have as models. She wasn't Boswell's man of letters or Albom's professor, her greatness was personal rather than public, her impact came from teaching and conversing, rather than professing.

There are other models in which the author writes about the loss of his or her own friend or loved one with enough thoughtfulness or with such rich perspective that their relationship or their loved one's lost life becomes important for others as they see that person's life through the lens of the writer. One of the most notable of these memoirs of lost loved ones is *In Memoriam,*

written by Alfred Tennyson about the loss of his young friend, Arthur Hallam. Because Hallam was not only Alfred Tennyson's friend, but was also engaged to Alfred's younger sister, Emily, Tennyson had the responsibility of mourning Hallam's death not only for himself, but also for his family.[11]

So it may be that in writing about the death of my godmother, I will say something that resonates for others beyond those who know her simply by observing the details of her death and our friendship and thereby exposing the universals within them.[12] From the beginning, my reasons for writing about Sue Henry's death have been less defined than the motives of Albom or Boswell—I didn't observe Sue's life or death in order to write about it, and less solipsistic than Tennyson or Lewis—I chose to focus, not so much on *my* relationship with Sue as on the relationships I observed between Sue and others.

Within American Studies, there is a critical and literary tradition of connecting the personal matters of daily life with one's academic approach and understanding.[13] My thesis shares this impulse. American Studies scholarship is motivated by social purpose.[14] Amy Kaplan

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[11] Alfred Tennyson and Erik Irving Gray, In Memoriam: Authoritative Text: Criticism (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004) xii.

[12] Another classic of this genre is C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*—a description not so much of the life or death of his wife, but of his own grappling with her death. Other examples of memoirs concerning the death of a loved one are: *The Summer of the Great-Grandmother* by Madeleine L'Engle, *Mentor: a Memoir* by Tom Grimes, *Landscape Without Gravity: A Memoir of Grief* by Barbara Ascher, and *Two or Three Things I know for Sure* by Dorothy Allison.

[13] John Carlos Rowe, ed., *Post-Nationalist American Studies* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000), 5.

[14] Ibid., 16.

describes this as "connecting private troubles with public issues."[15] This thesis attempts to document a real-life example of a woman who went about the work of dying as an individual and as a part of a community.

The genre of memoir is one of the ways that this private/public connection has often been enacted in the American literary tradition and, as such, gives us a clear window not only into how Americans have lived, but how we have thought about how we have lived. In *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, William Zinsser refers to "memoir-rich American soil" and explains the distinction between autobiography and memoir; "Unlike autobiography, which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, omitting nothing, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it."[16] Memoir focuses on a particularly important moment in the author's life and in doing so is "a window into a life."[17]

Both autobiography and memoir have a history as popular forms of American writing. In an essay from 1976 in *American Studies: Topics and Sources*, Albert E. Stone discusses the rising popularity of autobiography during the 1970s and how the number of autobiographies at the time "increases almost astronomically."[18] The article claims that anyone who writes sincerely can find an audience in America. Three decades later, the same holds true for memoir. In *Memoir: A History*, published in 2009, Ben Yagoda states that in the United States the "total

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15 Amy Kaplan, ed., *Cultures of United States Imperialism (New Americanists)*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1994), 6.

16 Annie Dillard et al., *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir, Revised and Expanded Edition*, 2nd revise & expanded ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 11.

17 Ibid., 11.

18 Albert E. Stone and Robert H. Walker, *American Studies: Topics and Sources (Contributions in American Studies)* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976), 22.

sales in the categories of Personal Memoirs, Childhood memoirs, and Parental Memoirs increased more than 400 percent between 2004 and 2008."[19]

Inventing the Truth is a collection of talks on the art of writing memoirs delivered independently by eight prominent American authors and edited for print by William Zinsser. In his essay, Alfred Kazin asserts that memoirs are a part of "something fundamental to American literature—the writing of personal history."[20] He claims that in America everyone believes they have a story to tell. Several writers in the collection point to the number of major American literary works, including Henry David Thoreau's *Walden,* that play a significant role in the history of the tradition of personal narratives.

In *Your Life as Story: Discovering the "New Autobiography" and Writing Memoir as Literature*, Tristine Rainer describes the traditional memoir as one in which there are nine essential story elements, falling into three broader categories. There is the beginning with an initiating incident, a problem, and a desire line. There is the middle with a struggle with adversary, interim pivotal events, and a precipitating event. And there is the conclusion with crisis, climax, and realization. Perhaps the content of my thesis could contort itself to fit this mold, but the story wouldn't be the same for it.

Dorothy Allison, on the other hand, writes in her memoir *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, "I'm only supposed to tell one story at a time, one story. Every writing course I ever heard of said the same thing. Take one story, follow it through, beginning, middle, end. I don't

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19 Ben Yagoda, *Memoir: A History* (New York: Riverhead Hardcover, 2009), 7.

20 Annie Dillard et al., *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir, Revised and Expanded Edition*, 2nd revise & expanded ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 66.

do that. I never do. Behind the story I tell is the one I don't tell. Behind the story you hear is the one I wish I could make you hear."[21]

Linda Wagner-Martin puts it this way:

> It is important for both women writers of fiction and women biographers who attempt to tell women's lives truthfully to recognize that they must tell the stories that they want to tell with integrity, regardless of criticism about structure or genre…As the structure of recent women's fiction suggest, women's lives often break away from conventional patterns; sometimes the breaking away is, indeed, the story worth telling. Accordingly, the voices of women characters and narrators must appear in a format that lets them speak for their own emphases—their own sense of event—in a structure that may need to differ from the traditional… What should be most compelling about the woman as subject, to return to Heilbrun's comment, is her possession of "a special gift without name or definition." The explanation of that gift, and its place in the subject's life narrative, should ideally create the biography's structure. [22]

I believe that Sue's "special gift" was her ability to form community through conversation. In order to enact this quality in my thesis, I have chosen to organize the material around three scenes, a format that allows me to shape the narrative and the reflection that I've brought together around the process of Sue's dying into a process of revelation. The scenes I used all come from my recordings of conversations from her last two weeks of life. The transcriptions of the conversations provide the dialogue. Out of the depiction of the actual events, I explore thematic connections between moments of the recordings and the rest of Sue's life.

The structure by which I tell the story mirrors my own process of remembering. It is grounded and refocused over and over again by the primary source material, the transcription of the recording, but it can't resist telling other stories as well. Therefore, the writing moves swiftly between transcriptions and reflections. It might give one the impression of a conversation

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[21] Dorothy Allison, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (New York: Plume, 1996), 39.

[22] Linda Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women's Lives: The New Biography* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 29-31.

occurring between two different points in time. In one moment, there is the actual recorded event playing out as it happened. In the next, the same time period is written and remembered as a part of the past. This is an experiment in writing just as listening to the recordings has been an experiment in remembering. It is my hope that both the writing and the remembering are fuller, richer, and above all, truer, for the places I have allowed them to freely take me.

In talking about the process of writing her memoir, *Poets in Their Youth*, Eileen Simpson says, "I would wait to see what came up on the memory screen, as people do when they're recalling dreams or other experiences. It was like waiting under water for a certain species of fish to swim by."[23] For my thesis, I ask that you wait under water with me. It is my hope that in piecing together the various reflections throughout the thesis, the impression of a more complete story forms. I hope that, like individual fish aligning themselves in a school to give the impression of something more powerful, my various memories might align themselves with the recorded conversations to create the impression of Sue Henry's powerful final days.

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[23] Annie Dillard et al., *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir, Revised and Expanded Edition*, 2nd revise & expanded ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 109.

CHAPTER I
Visiting with Sue

"*Wonder How You Can Touch That Many People?*"
—Anne Henry Harvey

Setting: Sue's last day in the hospital in Jackson, Mississippi.

Characters:

Sue (S)

Anne (A) —Sue's sister

Jean (J) — Sue's longtime friend/mentee, my Aunt

Mary (M) —Sue's sister-in-law, divorced from Sue's brother many years before

Event: Sue's sister-in-law Mary comes to the hospital room as my aunt Jean and I step out to buy nightgowns for Sue, leaving Sue, Anne, and Mary to visit.

As I reflect on the last two weeks of Sue's life, I am struck by how imperfect my memory of it has been. As indelible as the events were, my own emotional recording of it is uneven and disordered. I have great difficulty in sequencing the events. It's hard to remember who was where and when. My memory of the time I spent in the hospital with Sue blends together. We were all confused about the passage of time in the hospital where life seems to move slowly, and in fits, between doctors' visits and appointments. My aunt frequently asked what day it was, referring to her sense of disorientation as hospital amnesia. It seemed as if we were in Sue's hospital room forever. Could it have only been a week?

Stepping out of the elevator onto Sue's floor, visitors were met by the choice of a right turn into the Postpartum Unit where mothers with newborn infants were being cared for or a left turn into the Oncology Unit filled by patients with cancer serious enough for hospitalization. There was a powerful juxtaposition of life and death occurring on that floor. Often, as the elevator approached Sue's floor, I wished I were turning right.

Where the two wings diverged, there was a small sitting area with six seats fixed around an overhead TV. There were never enough chairs, and the TV, which seemed program to re-illuminate itself regularly, had to be repeatedly turned off. Many important conversations occurred in that sitting area. It was not in an enclosed area, so anyone walking along the halls could hear our conversations: tense discussions over what was best for Sue in terms of treatment. Several people felt they should have a say in decisions regarding Sue's care during her last days. I think these discussions would be difficult in any family, but they were further complicated as people attempted to be polite about how they viewed their relative roles in relation to Sue, while simultaneously asserting their own beliefs about what was right for her care. We also used the sitting area as an overflow area to give space to Sue's visitors as they had their private last visits with Sue. Many of them came out of her room to sit with us there, needing a space to cry before they could bring themselves to leave the building.

We were in Sue's hospital room when her sister-in-law, Mary Henry, came to make her final visit. Mary had been married to Sue's brother, Doc, and is the mother of Sue's two nephews and niece, but she and Doc had been divorced for nearly 50 years. Nonetheless, Sue, Anne and Mary had remained friends. Anne and Sue made a point to visit Mary and her children and grandchildren for at least one afternoon a year at Christmastime when they were all together. Over the last six years however, their visits had lapsed, so this visit in the hospital was a sort of

reunion, as well as being perhaps the first time the three women had a chance to talk in private without the distractions of children, grandchildren and Christmas rituals. The conversation transcribed in this chapter comes from a single sustained conversation between Sue, Anne, and Mary during Sue's first days in the hospital in Jackson, MS. At times, I have used ellipses in part of the conversation. The missing dialogue is mostly comprised of discussions about Mary's family. In this scene—and in most of my recordings, there are sections of conversation that might be considered "gossip." This is not to say that the conversation was malicious, but that it focused on the details of other people's lives.

In *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation,* Deborah Tannen writes, "The impression that women talk too freely and too much in private situations is summed up in a word: *gossip*. Although gossip can be destructive, it isn't always; it can serve a crucial functioning in establishing intimacy—especially if it is not "talking against" but simply "talking about."[24] By leaving out these parts of the conversation in which Sue and Anne catch up on the details of Mary's children, grandchildren and others that they know in common, I am not implying that they are unimportant. Rather, they are particularly important to these particular women. I have chosen not to include the details of these sections, because they are irrelevant to my subject, but it is important to note that this kind of conversation was a part of the conversation between Sue, Anne and Mary during their last hour together. Tannen argues that friendships between women form out of gossip and that small talk is important in enabling a sense of friendship between women to continue.[25] The women in this scene were able to find

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[24] Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 96.

[25] Ibid., 97, 102.

much catch up on. They knew enough about each other's lives to know who to ask about. They also found new relationships to discuss. In *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Development,* Carol Gilligan writes, "To have a voice is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard; it is an intensely relational act." [26] This conversation is certainly intensely relational, and the women act with grace us they speak and listen.

Sue, Anne and Mary are all Southern women born in Mississippi. These recordings capture their accents, intonation, and meanings in ways that I cannot render with written text. Together, the sound of their conversation is almost musical in its tonality. Sue's voice is deep and rhythmic. Anne's is higher and almost sounds like it's ringing. She has great range. And perhaps it is due to Mary's being Southern that I am inclined to characterize her voice as genteel, but only in the best sense. It is refined, level, and sweet. The transcript begins as Mary enters the hospital room:

Sue (S): Mary, you're the dearest thing.
Anne (A): Doesn't she stay the prettiest thing?
Mary (M): Glad to see you, Sue.
S: I'm so glad to see you.
M: I couldn't miss coming by.
S: Right.
M: That's the reason I came to tell you. These are your children?
S: This is Kate.
M: Kate.
S: And this is Jean.
M: Jean.
Jean (J): Hi.
S: They have stayed and cared for me every moment.
A: And me.
M: And you. It's so good to meet you both.

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[26] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, 29th printing ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), xvi.

J: They've been good patients. We've been hearing about you for a long time.
A (to Mary): You look so pretty.
M: Don't look at that cause it doesn't match.
A: That's right. It holds things. So good to see you. Have a seat.
J: We're making a nightgown run. So we're going out and about.
M: So I won't get to stay and get to know you then.
J: Well, we'd love to get to know you. But I think you guys will have a fun time visiting with each other. We had a great visit from Ed.
S: Wasn't that nice?
M: He's a sweetheart.
J: It really was fun.
M: Well, he was so glad he came. And you called him yesterday.
S: I did.
J: In fact, she woke up about six and said, "We got to call Ed." But it was a little too early. It was about 6:30. Then finally at quarter to seven, we called him. But it was ten to eight his time.
A: I didn't know we called him.
S: Yes. Just called him and thanked him. Um huh! And Mary this means so much to me.
M: Means a lot to me, too, Sue.
A to J and K: Thanks you all.
J: Bacon cheeseburger? Just regular cheeseburger, or bacon cheeseburger?
A: Ohh, yes. All of that. But just get the gowns right now.
S: A Wendy's baked potato. That's all.
A: You all want some money before all that? Cause I got a hundred-dollar bill right here.
J: Wait…
A: But I had some of Sue's.
M: I have some right here.
J: No, we're good. We'll get it when we get back. Mary, can we get you anything? Can't say how soon we'll be back, but. . .
M: I came empty handed. I figured I couldn't get you anything that you could use while you're here. And you'd have to take it all with you.
A (to Jean): She could wear my cute pajamas. I think she'd be better off.
J: (laughs)
A: Don't tell me they're not cute. They're just as cute as a bug.
J: It's just hard to imagine Sue in that. Sue in little pajamas. Where'd I put my keys?

"It's just hard to imagine Sue in that"—Jean

During Sue's time at the hospital, Aunt Jean and I were always on a search for long-sleeved nightgowns. They were hard to come by in May in Mississippi. Sue liked long sleeves. She always wore long-sleeved t-shirts. Except when she dressed up. Then she wore long-sleeved button-down shirts. A lot of people joked about the fact that even in the summer in Alabama she

wore long sleeves. Camp stresses modesty as an important value, but I don't think Sue's long-sleeved t-shirts were necessarily about being modest. I think she just knew what she liked.

Sue at Camp DeSoto

Besides her t-shirts, most of her clothing was from L.L. Bean or Lands' End. But there was a piece of her wardrobe that didn't seem to fit. She wore a large diamond ring on her right hand. She inherited it from her aunt. My cousin Emmy loved that Sue wore a right-hand diamond. She thought it made a feminist statement about financial independence. Emmy inherited the diamond ring. She's Sue's namesake. They share the middle name McLaurin. Emmy wears the ring proudly.

Sue had important relationships with her aunts. As a result of her father dying when Sue was only thirteen, her aunts played a stronger role in her critical teenage years than they might have otherwise. Sue's experience with strong women role models prepared her to be that type of role model for so many women after her. There is a legacy of care and commitment that runs through Sue. Sue's aunts cared for her deeply, and Sue cared for them just as deeply. When a girl is in her teenage years, a woman role model who is not the girl's mother can be a powerful, shaping force. Sue has been that role model for countless women in all stages of their lives. My mother and my aunt are certainly two of those women. Sue cared for them as her aunts had cared for her.

~

The recording of this section is inaudible at first, but later comments indicate they are discussing the end of life or death:

M to S: Is it really?
S: It is amazing.
M: What a wonderful thing to find out.
S: It really is.
M: Yeah.
A: Have a seat.
M: Don't you want to get out of the sun?
A: This is perfect.
M: OK. Don't you want me to close that a little bit, so it won't be on you?
S: I don't love it, but…
M: All right.
S: I like a little sunshine.
(Sound of curtain closing)
S: Yeah, Anne and I found out one night. And, I mean, within 30 minutes we had settled. I had worried about Anne as you can imagine.
A: I kind of depend on her. I'll tell you. I'll be frank with you.
S: And it's been just wonderful.
M: And it didn't take that long before you. . .
S: I knew that everything was all right.
M: Is that right? That is something.
A: The only kind of any kind of warning we had was Sue had not been eating well. For about a year, I'll be frank.
M: Really, it had been a long time that you weren't eating well, but you didn't know why.
A: I didn't worry about it, cause it followed a break. She'd had three breaks in four years. And I figure three breaks in four years ought to make you skinny or something.
M: Hips or knees?
S: Hips, femur and a knee replacement.
M: My goodness. And the doctors didn't…
A: Isn't that funny?
M: Really is. And somebody didn't pick up on it?
S: I used a doctor right there in Valley Head, an Indian doctor, wonderful, as my internist. And then I have a cardiologist, and that's all.
A: And she had had. You think it would have showed up. She had a pacemaker put in.
M: A what?
A: A pacemaker put in.
M: Oh yeah.
A: And it hadn't showed up with anything.
M: Yeah.
S: All right, now, Mary. You may or may not remember, but Jean who was right here with Kate and Jane, sister in Winston-Salem, came to camp as staff members within three years after their mother had died. And when they were. . .
A: . . .little.
M: They were children.
S: No.
A: They were teenagers.

S: Yeah.
M: They had not been to camp before.
S: No, no. And they just adopted me. And they have been here. One of them has been here every day. Kate, a sophomore at Emory, has been here every day.
M: Kate, now is a sophomore at Emory. And her mother came.
S: Uh huh. And her mother and, or, Jean. One or the other.
M: Her mother is Jane.
S: Right. And they. Jean has a cabin on the mountain right close to me. And they are going to help Anne. And they have assured me they're going to take care of Anne, which is beautiful.
A: They've already started.
S: They have.
A: They planned this. I said, "When's Jane coming you all?" And they said, "Wednesday." They keep a chart.
[PLAY CLIP 1 to listen to the recording of a portion of the previous section.]

"And they have been here"—Sue

Like Sue, I have always been close to my own aunt, but I grew even closer to her during Sue's death. Aunt Jean and I were the only ones fortunate enough to be there for all of the final two weeks. I learned a great deal from Jean that week. I watched her negotiate an entirely new terrain of radiation, hospice, breathing treatments, etc. Of course, many others were involved in all of these things, but Jean was there in front of me. Clearly, she was anxious. What I was most struck by was her ability to bring in light-hearted moments. Often, I felt as if I were operating mechanically, pretending to be accustomed to watching a loved one die, responding to requests and following orders. I wasn't the best conversationalist then. I have the recordings to prove it.

Jean, on the other hand, was lively and animated. She was genuinely present to the situation. She truly was as comfortable or uncomfortable, joyful or stressed, as she seems to be in the recordings, but she never got stuck in any of those places. I attribute all of this to Jean's natural character, but I also know that some of that was encouraged and nurtured by Sue. In the act of hiring Jean as a Camp DeSoto counselor thirty-five years earlier, Sue had begun her expression of faith in Jean's ability to nurture and care for others. Summers on staff at Camp

DeSoto surely had a profound impact on Jean's sense of responsibility for caring for others. In the note cards I have from Sue's talks given to staff, it is clear that Sue takes that work seriously.

~

Mary caught Sue up on her daughter Frances Anne who was returning from Kazakhstan soon and wanted to be a part of Sue's care:[27]

M: Frances wants in on this somewhere.
S: Yeah. Um huh. When is she coming?
A: Tonight.
M: She's coming into Houston tonight and was going to fly to Jackson tomorrow, but I'm going to have to call Houston and head her off. Because she'd be coming, then you're going home in the morning and you won't even be here. Then she'd just have to go home and turn around and you'd be on the mountain.
A: I hate this, but of course this is Frances Anne. The doctors have told her when she's home she could not have company for a week.
S: Yeah.
M: Is that right?
S: Uh huh.
M: Well, that's OK. She'll understand.
A: She'll understand.
S: And that's reasonable. I've had a good bit of company.
M: That's why I called Anne and wanted to know whether or not I should stay home. And I tried to pin you down. And she said. . .
S: Well, I wanted you to come.
M: I wanted to come. I really did want to.

"And that's reasonable, I've had a good bit of company"—Sue

Visiting was simply hard. Everyone wanted to come see Sue, but she was tired. She needed to rest. When we went to her home in Mentone, Alabama, she had doctor's orders to not have any visitors. Anne needed to hear that. We put a sign on the door that read something like, "No visitors please, doctor's orders," but hopefully with more tact. It was antithetical to Sue's character and to her log cabin home, but it was necessary. In anticipation of the inevitable

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[27] Frances Anne is the daughter of Mary and Sue's brother, Doc. Sue and her sister, Anne, never had children. Her brother, Doc, married and had 3 children. Frances Anne is one of them. Frances Anne was in Kazakhstan when she heard Sue was sick. She happened to be flying home that week, and so she had a chance to be with Sue during this time.

visitors, my dad put hand sanitizer on the table inside the door. And, of course, they kept on coming. Everyone who came to see Sue had a special relationship with her. We tried hard to respect that. At the same time, we tried hard to let her rest. She was tired. She was dying. Nevertheless, Sue took time to entertain every one of her visitors. She made sure she said everything she needed to. She let everyone say what he or she needed to. It looked draining. Plenty of times, both sides were in denial. People didn't want to know it might be the last meeting, and Sue didn't want people to know it might be the last meeting. We would always leave the room when someone visited her.

It was awkward deciding when to go back into Sue's room. How do we help people excuse themselves from a conversation with someone they love and may never see again? How does someone who's dying ask a person to leave? Were we relieving Sue's visitors? Were we making it easier for them or were we hurting them? Were we ruining something? It didn't often play out that way, but I had anxiety around it. It was always hard to navigate. Thankfully, the nurses were there when we were in the hospital, and usually there was something to be done. In most cases, the person was ready to go when it was time, but there were a few who had a lot of trouble letting go or walking away. This was painful. To ask someone to leave was terrible. It's hard to explain why our role as gatekeeper was necessary without sounding cold or thoughtless: Sue had a large following. Many women were devoted to her. She was loved. During the last two weeks of her life, Sue was busy. She did it well. I don't know how you learn to negotiate those things.

~

Mary turns the conversation to Anne:

M: I want to know about your matching armband there.
A: (laughter)

S: Oh, I can't wait.
A: Sue is getting more out of this.
S: I'll tell you. I would just like to. It just cracks me up. Anne came in the other night and Jean was with her and she was just hurting. Just hurting bad. And so everybody was encouraging her to go to the emergency room and she did the next morning. Do you know what her diagnosis was?
M: What?
S: Now do you know of anybody less excessive—it's gout.
A: What it is though. People don't realize, it's from. . .
M: It's from drinking too much. Don't you remember the Katzenjammer kids?
S and M: Exactly!
S: And I can't get Anne to stop! (Laughter)
A: Jean says gout is excessive inflammation in the arthritis.
M: I'll tell you it is excessive. Is it painful terribly?
A: Ohh, I could no more bend my wrist than anything.
M: Is it helping you? (Referencing wrist guard)
A: No, I just been using this all the time. I believe it helps.
M: And what can you do about the gout. Do you still have it?
A: I still have it to a certain extent, but it is much better. He gave me the prednisone pack.

"I'll tell you. I would just like to" —Sue

Sue might have found comedy in that day, but for me it played out much more like a drama. Seeing as Sue has told the story from her perspective, I think it fitting that I tell it from my own.

Sue's sister Anne had been with her every day in the hospital at this point, sleeping in the chair in Sue's room for many of the first nights while they were there. Now that Jean and I were in place, we tried to convince her to go home and get some good rest. She hadn't been in good health herself when Sue had fallen sick; in fact, Sue had been in Jackson at the time so that she could care for Anne. During the time we were together in the hospital, Anne's hands had begun to hurt terribly. One morning when I picked her up from her home to take her to be with Sue in the hospital, her hands were so badly inflamed, the nurse at her assisted living center told her she needed to go to the emergency room. I went with her.

Negotiating admittance to the ER was a slow process. Finally, we were admitted to a curtained off room to wait for the doctor; Anne fell asleep on the table, and I fell asleep in the chair. Eventually, the doctor came in and asked, "Is this your granddaughter?" Anne answered, "Yes." That meant something. During our week together in the hospital, Anne had been adjusting to the fact that we were Sue's family. It was hard for her to fully swallow. But in that moment in the ER I knew she had. And she enjoyed it, too. She had decided to take me on herself.

We were in the ER most of the day. Ultimately, the doctor told Anne her pain was caused by gout. She was appalled. Anne's understanding of gout was that it was a disease of alcoholics, and she holds a deep-rooted traditional southern Baptist perspective on alcohol. I doubt she has ever tasted liquor. She gave the doctor a second chance, and was satisfied once he explained gout as a form of severe arthritis. That was the term she preferred to use: severe arthritis. She quoted his explanation often throughout the next few days: she had a case of severe arthritis.

A young man working in the ER wheeled her out when we were done, saying "That's nice of your granddaughter to bring you up here." We nodded.

"Tell me, what's your secret to staying young? If I'm going to try and live to be your age, what's the secret to staying young?" Anne couldn't hear him. "Thank you" was the only advice she gave him.

When we went back to Sue's room, I expected to be greeted with sympathy. Instead, as we walked in, Sue said, "Ohhh, here comes my sister with *gout*!" She laughed. Anne was angry: "It is severe arthritis." I didn't understand the joke until my mother explained it to me. I had no idea that gout could be scandalous.

Sue didn't tease Anne for long; a greater event had captured her interest: "Did you all hear the news? Obama has nominated Sotomayor for supreme court justice!"

"Oh," I replied. I didn't know anything about Sotomayor, and I was still waiting to get more praise for my time spent in the ER.

Sue continued, "And do you know what his reasons were for nominating her?" I didn't, and she quoted them to me great detail and excitement. Later, I heard her discussing Obama's nomination of Sotomayor with others in my recordings. In the midst of her own discovery of cancer and imminent death, Sue was charged with excitement about what this would mean for the country's future.

"…But I mean, how about Sotomayor?" She would exclaim. "(President Obama) appointed her for all the right reasons you would appoint, but then he said, but why I have really appointed her is she knows compassion." Sue loved that.

We turned on the news and watched the coverage of the story. She normally preferred to read rather than to watch the news. She read the *Atlanta Constitution* everyday, driving 12 miles to pick it up on the other side of the Alabama/Georgia state line. At the end of a day's work, Sue would stop by the state line convenience stores to collect her *Constitution* with the same zeal and regularity as others from her dry county collected their Budweiser. After she read her paper, she would pass it on to one of her neighbors as if to squeeze a greater portion of the wholesome Georgian liberal news into her Alabama neighborhood. She subscribed to at least a dozen periodicals and news magazines, and was happy to pass them on as well, but no one seemed to keep up with Sue's appetite for the written media. Her taste in periodicals were wide-ranging, but her favorite was *Sojourners,* a periodical on radical faith that began in response to the

Vietnam War and has led investigative work on issues from the arms for hostages scandals in the 70's to Congressional hearings in recent years.

A few years earlier when Sue had a broken leg, the Hurts set up a television in the cabin for her, and my mother had tried to get her to start following the "Daily Show," but Sue said it was too sarcastic. Actually, I think it was too conservative for Sue. She didn't particularly like the regular news shows either, though she watched them when Anne visited. It wasn't until her last two weeks of life that she admitted she could see how people enjoyed watching news on television. Interestingly, all of us took this as a small victory. On the day of Sue's memorial service two months later, Sotomayor was confirmed. There was something poignant about that. In her will, Sue left a significant portion of her estate to *Sojourners.* She took her reading and her world seriously.

I love that she still cared so passionately about justice and civil rights in her last few days. Hospice gave us a list of the things to expect when someone was dying. We expected that many things would disappear as we cared for her: appetite, physical abilities, and focus. Interest in other people was also supposed to wane, but that was never true for Sue. Until the end, she was interested in the world and interested in other people. I don't know how. Maybe it was because she went so quickly, but I think it was because she was so deeply interested always.

One afternoon in the hospital, I received an email from the info@barackobama explaining his reasons for selecting Sotomayor, and I started reading it aloud to Sue. It was a bit dull. She told me, "Yeah, that's enough." Sue was clear when she wanted to move on. I put down the email and began reading to her from Newsweek instead. Later, however, she enthusiastically told one of her visitors about the email article I was reading. Nothing seemed lost on her.

It was a funny thing, to have a woman, so clearly dying, to be busy. She felt that there were things to do. She had relationships to tie up, she had news to hear, she had stories to tell, she had laughter to share, and she had wisdom for all of us. She turned to me one day and said, "Kate, life is good, and I don't think I knew it. I mean, I knew it was good, but I don't think I knew how good it is." I wrote it down and put it in my wallet. I hadn't started recording yet, and I knew that was something I needed to remember.

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Anne directs the attention back to Sue and motions Mary to look at Sue's arm:

A: Sue's is all swollen.
S: It's fine.
A: What is it they called it?
S: I think they called it . . .
A: What?
S: I think they call it cancer.
A: (Laughter) No, not your arm swelling.
S: No.
A: We couldn't understand why her arm was swelling.
M: But it's just the left arm that's swelling.
S: Look, Anne. (Excited that it is only her left arm swelling)
A: I know it. They beat you to death.
S: Yeah, Mary. Fret not. It's good.
M: Well, you know, Sue…
A: She has a peace that you . . .
M: I can see part of your peace, though, is in that you made your mark on so many children and adults, too.
A: Sue, where's your cards?
M: I wish one of them were mine.
A: I said, everyone where I live knows her. They sent them through me.

"Sue, where's your cards?"—Anne

Sue received hundreds of cards while she was in the hospital. We read them to her as she lay in her bed, explaining to us who the people were who had sent the cards. She treated every person like a celebrity, having something important to tell us about everyone whose card we read. Eudora Welty, one of Sue's favorite authors and a fellow Mississippian, writes about

listening to the telling of other people's lives, or "gossip" in *One Writer's Beginnings*. Welty tells a story about her mother not wanting her to overhear gossip. Welty writes that it "would be just what I was longing to hear, whatever it was."[28] I felt the same way as Sue told me about the authors of those cards. I don't remember many of the details, but I do remember my amazement at the way she could recall so many of them. I was impressed by the interest she took in so many people's lives and her expectation that those lives would be important to everyone in the room. When done in a thoughtful and loving way, it shows a great respect for a person to care enough for them to discuss their lives with other people.

One card read, "There's a circle of care around you, and, as always, it's me next to you." It came from a single man about Sue's age. Jean asked if they ever flirted. Sue said, "Yeah."

Emmy and I were shocked both by Jean's question and Sue's answer. We had been wondering about Sue's love life. It had been a mystery to us. One day in the hospital, Emmy and I were alone with Sue. I think everyone else was getting lunch. We sat there for a while. We talked to her about her childhood. We found out a great deal. Then, I got up the nerve—I want to take credit for that—we both wanted to know, and Emmy wasn't going to take the lead.

Sue with her neighbor

I asked, "Sue, have you ever been in love?"

"You know, once or twice I thought, this might work, but no." She was honest with us and easy about it. I thought it would be uncomfortable. She didn't seem to enjoy or not enjoy talking about it. She

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[28] Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings (William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization)* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1998), 14

just seemed fine. We thought it was hilarious. She said there was a farmer and a dairyman. My mother told me about a teacher before. It sounded more exciting the way my mother described the story. We asked Anne about all of it later. She knew one of the men and confirmed that he had been interested, but she didn't know he and Sue had a romantic relationship.

Like the cards received in the hospital, I found many letters as I went through Sue's house after she died. She had other people's writing, but little of her own. She kept diaries, but they only contained sparse notes. My aunt made fun of me for how readily I read them. I hadn't thought twice about it. Afterwards I did. James Atlas said, "There is a seedy aspect to pawing through a life, but there is merit in preserving fact and feeling and insight."[29]

Normally, I would have thought hard about reading a person's diary. I want to burn mine when I die. I have diaries from the 4th grade. I wrote pages upon pages every night for years, and still do occasionally. I'd be mortified if anyone read them. Why didn't I think about those when I read Sue's? Most of what I said, most of what I wrote about didn't matter for very long. Most of it I didn't remember ever caring about. Sue didn't write those things. She didn't write about things she wouldn't care about later. She wrote bullet points with things like "community life in America." I wrote about boys and homework assignments. She wrote "the church." But as far as quantity goes, she didn't do well. She wrote sporadically. I believe she prayed often, but there is little written record.

That's one of the most interesting things about Sue. She lived alone and had every opportunity to be secretive. She had room for a private life that few people can afford, but after all that, she had very little that was private. When I was looking through Sue's things, I came

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[29] Catherine N. Parke, *Studies in Literary Themes and Genres Series: Biography* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), ix.

across a letter that was the most illicit document I found in Sue's house. The letter was written to a woman whom I assume was the mother of a camper. It asks the mother if she is listening to her daughter. I think it is one of those letters you write, but never plan to send. I don't know why Sue kept it. It was nice to see how she got angry, and not surprising to know that her anger was on behalf of a young woman.

~

Anne continues:

A: They were having Sue's honorary retreat the weekend. . .
S: Yeah
A: . . .we found out what she had.
M: Is that right?
A: Yessir, during that day.
M: See, I told you she made a mark.
A: I know it
M: That's the thing and people like me, I haven't made my mark yet. I've got so darn much still to learn, Sue.
S: Well. . .
M: I'm still working on it.
S: Tell me about that. That's all right, too.
M: Well, at least I know that.
S: You'll learn what you need to learn.
M: I don't know. I'm not sure I'll ever get it straight. But I really have been thinking about how many people, how much you mean to so many people.
A: I can't believe it. See, I just wonder how you can touch that many people. People from every state in the Union.
S: It's the truth.
M: That is unbeliev . . It's got to be a good, a good thing to feel that, and bound to be a part of helping you to feel good about it now.
S: It is. And Marsha asked me the other day, "Sue, what do I want to teach children at Camp?" And I said, I said "Just service. Just teach them to serve and love them. That's good enough.
M: That's wonderful.
S: Good enough.
M: Good enough.
A: I've learned. I just—be kind to the one with them. So many people have done so many little things. And don't forget them. And yet I've just never seen anything like the kind of attention she's getting.
S: It's been an incredible lesson. And you know, I must admit, I just never thought I'd look at Him face to face with this kind of thing. He's right there.
M: Um huh.

S: He is right there.
[PLAY CLIP 2 to listen to the recording of a portion of the previous section, beginning with a small portion of the section before it.]

"I've got so darn much still to learn"—Mary

Sue's sister-in-law Mary is eighty-three years old when she says, "I've got so darn much still to learn." She still feels that there is time to learn. As do Anne and Sue. All three women talk about Sue's dying as an experience providing new lessons on life.

In *Composing A Life*, Mary Catherine Bateson writes about "life as an improvisatory art, about the ways we combine familiar and unfamiliar components in response to new situations…A good meal, like a poem or a life, has a balance and diversity, a certain coherence and fit…This book attempts to turn my question around, to look at problems in terms of the creative opportunities they present."[30] Bateson asserts that women shaping their lives are participating in a creative act, especially as the roles for women in American society are becoming increasingly flexible. Bateson writes, "For all of us, continuing development depends on nurture and guidance long after the years of formal education, just as it depends on seeing others ahead on the road with who it is possible to identify…Education, whether for success or failure, is never finished."[31] During the last weeks of her life, Sue spoke often of the lessons she was learning from dying, describing them as good—even amazing. Mary goes on to say, "I need to know that." Sue responds, "Everybody does."

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30 Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Pr, 1989), 3-4.

31 Ibid., 55-56.

Sue taught in schools for many years, and she continued to teach in other creative ways throughout her life; taking her talent along with her through multiple phases. Even in her last weeks of life, she continued to learn and teach.[32]

Mary gracefully begins her exit:

…
M: You all are making this so easy for me, and so interesting, and I don't want to leave, but I've used up my time. I don't mean I've used up my time, but I've used up Sue's time. But I wanted to come.
S: But I'm so glad you came. I know it's trouble.
M: No, it's not any trouble, but what you did was. Actually it's a blessing that I came now, because this is what I needed.
S: And the truth is: I'm not going to be here too long. That's good, too.
M: No, it's not good, Sue. I'm glad that you. I see what you're saying, I see what you're saying, but it's not good.
S: Well, now. Doctor who is a Camp friend, not my official doctor. Anyway looking at the records and all, he thinks it's possible I have a year.
M: You have a year? That's wonderful Sue.
S: Isn't that wonderful.
M: It's wonderful, Sue. I think it's possible that there could be a miracle myself.
S: Well, maybe, but I don't have to have one. It's just all right.
A: A year.
S: It would be fun.
M: A year. I don't believe it, what I mean is it's too good to believe. And then you would spend that year on the mountain that you love.
S: Exactly.

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[32] In 2003, Mary Elizabeth Moore asked to interview Sue for an oral history project at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. The project is titled "Composing a Life: Women Changing the Church and Society," referencing Mary Catherine Bateson's book. Moore interviewed thirty-one women from across the southeastern United States. All of the women had some relationship with Candler School of Theology. The video recording of the interview is now held in the Pitts Theology Library archives at Emory University.

Sue's home

"On the mountain that you love"—Mary

Sue lived along Alabama 117, Highway Above the Clouds. That was her street address. You can address a letter to Highway Above the Clouds. Her life was poetic. She slept on a screened-in porch on the back of her house. The front of her house faced the highway. I spent the night there a few times. It's a wonderful sleeping porch, but it isn't a quiet one. On one side, you hear crickets chirping and frogs croaking. On the other side, you hear trucks flying by. Like every other aspect of her life, Sue seemed caught in a funny middle ground, and happily so.

Her bed was a simple metal frame; it would have fit in at Camp. She slept on that bed eight months out of the year. Her electric blanket allowed her to stay on the porch long after the temperatures dropped in the fall. When she had a pacemaker put in, one of the biggest disappointments was that she couldn't sleep on the porch except during the summer. The doctor told her it would be unsafe to sleep with her electric blanket on. Another compromise of aging was that she had to settle for Decaf rather than her beloved coffee. One of my most familiar images of Sue is of her holding a coffee mug and having a conversation.

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Mary continues to say goodbye:

…
M: Well bye. I love you.
S: I love you. I'm so thankful you came.
M: Well, thank you so much for saying that, because I feel so totally inadequate.
A: We missed you though this Christmas.
M: I had it on the top of my list to write Sue and Anne and tell them about it.
A: We talked about it.
S: Yeah, we haven't been very obviously grateful, but deeply grateful to you for maintaining this relationship.
M: I regret that I didn't stay closer earlier.
S: You did it pretty good.
…
S: I leave in the morning. Tomorrow I'll be on the mountain…
…
M: Will the girls, Jean and Jane, be with you?
S: Jean leaves tomorrow.
A: So Jane can come, but Kate will still be here.
M: Frances wants to come . . . So when should she come?
…
S: Two weeks.
A: I think we should really respect what he says. She's really weaker than . . .
S: Yeah, really weaker than we expected to be. These two or three weeks have been tiring.
M: I'm sure they have. That's why I checked with Anne to be sure it was OK for me to come.
A: I don't know when she's going back.
S: I'm doing, you know…
M: Chemo.
S: Not chemo, radiation. Every day. But that will be over tomorrow.
M: Radiation, is that as hard as they say it is?
S: No, un uh. Now it's not fun.
A: She never said it hurt. She just said she was so tired . . . She would get completely worn out.

"So when should she come?"—Mary

There was never a discussion about who *should* be involved in caring for Sue. It was really about who *got* to be involved. Unquestionably, there were some hurt feelings as a result. The nature of an extended sense of family probably often lends itself to this type of ambiguity and ensuing frustrations. We put a sign on the door of her hospital room that said "immediate family only." It was up to people's discretion as to what that meant. It seemed obvious that it included the Coreys, Hurts, Stephens, and Mary McNamara. The Hurts were busy with camp and

they visited, but they didn't stay long. Jean and I were consistently with her the last two weeks. Frances Anne, Sue's niece, joined us in Mentone two days after we arrived. She was a tremendous help. We all bonded. Frances Anne had always been especially close to Sue's sister Anne, and I think her being there was a gift for Anne as well.

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Sue jokes:

S: The only trouble I've had with Anne and Jean is that one of them is in the corner looking for something and the other is in the corner . . . It drives me crazy.
A: It really has been a lost cause. Because we can't find anything. We got here in a hurry. We were upset when we arrived . . .
S: I'll be patient.
M: You'll be patient with them.
S: Not easily, but . . .
A: She'll be patient with them if we'll take her on to Mentone.
M: I'm, I know you're glad you're going tomorrow.
A: She wanted to go home, Mary.
S: And you know when Camp starts? Tomorrow.
M: No.
S: No, staff comes tomorrow.
M: That's got to be significant.
S: It's significant, but it's all right, too.

"Staff comes tomorrow"—Sue

From Sue's bedroom you can look over her backyard to a rusty truck bed. There's a small wooden structure for a garden and a field. If you walk through the woods and across a creek you can get to Camp. Staff training was going on while we were in Mentone. The counselors came walking through that trail to come sing to Sue. We opened her window so she could hear them. They sang hymns. Sue wasn't the most attentive she's ever been. She whispered over her shoulder, "Sure is a somber looking bunch." They were completely straight-faced, hands clasped together, most of them had their heads tilted forward or all the way down. Half of them hadn't

heard of Camp DeSoto before that summer. They didn't know Sue, but they were being appropriate.

We were standing over her bed, looking across to them. I saw some of my friends and waved. We were happy, but they were not. We had grown comfortable. We were happy to be in Mentone and we were happy to see them. They were walking to go sing hymns to a dying woman. I think both of our feelings made sense. My cousin Emmy and I tried to contain our laughter. We were shaking. It might have been rude, but since none of them were looking at us I don't think they noticed. Sue acted as if she didn't know what was troubling them. At this point we, like the counselors, had our heads down, but in our case it was to conceal our grins. They did look nearly ridiculously somber.

Later that day, my friends came by and knocked on the door. They were walking by Sue's house during their free period. Her house was near the Camp trails, and DeSoto staff loved to walk there. They knew they weren't supposed to come in, and they weren't going to try to see Sue, but they wanted to say "hi" to me. It was good to see them. I had been on staff with them the summer before. I told them what Sue had said about them looking somber. They didn't find it as funny as we had. In many ways, they were ahead of us in our arc towards grieving for Sue.

Tannen, in writing on women's conversations, describes laments –"spontaneous, ritualized, oral poems that some Greek women chant to express grief over the loss of loved ones to expatriation or death."[33] Tannen writes, "According to anthropologist Joel Sherzer, the performance of 'tuneful weeping' over dead loved ones is the exclusive domain of women in

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[33] Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 100.

vastly differing societies all over the world."[34] In order for a Greek lament to be successful, other women had to join in with an expression of their own grief.[35] As Sue died, women sang together. The singing of hymns throughout Sue's dying days is comparable to the performing of laments. Women joined together, often spontaneously, as we will see in the transcription in chapter three, to sing in a way that communally expressed grief.

During Sue's last three days of life, she didn't speak and she mostly slept. One of those days, my cousin Emmy and I stood over Sue's bed singing hymns for some time. Although the hymns expressed the expectation of an afterlife and faith in God's goodness, meant to comfort Sue, it was an act of mourning on our part. Tannen states that this communal expression of grief bonds women and helps ease the pain of the loss.[36] Singing hymns was comforting, and it filled in the gaps when spoken words could not.

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"Well, the truth is, it was a surprise to us, but it's so good"—Sue

Anne mentions Phil, the current director of Camp DeSoto:

A: But you know who it's hard on. You know it's hard on. You know who has taken this… you know-
M: Who?
A: Phil. He just adores her. He spent two nights with her. About the first two nights. And has been planning everything along with the other group. Now Jean and Jane have been planning the assistance. You know the people who come in and spend the night.
S: And Jean and Jane are both aggressive, strong women.
A: They nearly walked over me there for a while.
M: Uh huh. Were they good friends before?
A: They're sisters.
M: They're sisters. Jean and Jane. Oh, that's right. They're sisters, and they lost their mother…I thought they'd both coincidentally lost two mothers. So they got an adopted mother.

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34 Ibid., 100.

35 Ibid., 100.

36 Ibid., 100.

A: They got a mother when they needed one.
M: That is absolutely . . . I think you'd call them beneficiaries and family.
A: Now Mary, she went for every baby and everything just like a mother would.
M: Sue, that's great.
S: Anne, let Mary go and see David.
M: Anyway, I'm going to go before those girls come back and find out that I have stayed this long. I'm so sorry I stayed this long. I still wouldn't take anything for. Thank you for making me feel good about you.
S: I wouldn't have taken anything for your having come.
A: Absolutely, me too.
M: I treasure the visit and your attitude. You're wonderful. You really are. You've taught us all so much.
S: Well, the truth is, it was a surprise to us, but it's so good.
M: I'm so glad to know that. I need to know that.
S: Absolutely, everybody does.
M: I'll pass the word.
S: Um huh. Everybody.
A: I loved seeing you.
S: Thank you. I love you.
M: I hope it's going to be easy.
S: I do, too.
M: I'm still looking for the miracle.
S: But it's all right.
M: I know it's all right. I know it's all right. I know nothing's easy, but I hope it will be easier.
A: We're going to make the most. We're going to make the most.

CHAPTER II
The Quotidian Details of a Good Death

"It Won't Be a Bit of Trouble"
—Anne Henry Harvey

Setting: Sue's cabin in Mentone, Alabama. First day back in Mentone after coming from the hospital in Jackson, Mississippi.

Characters:

Sue (S)

Chad (C)—My father

Jean (J)— Sue's longtime friend/mentee, my maternal aunt

Emmy (E)—Sue's godchild, my cousin, and Jean's daughter

Anne (A)—Sue's sister

Kate (K)—Myself

Event: My father, Chad, came to Jackson, Mississippi to assist transporting everyone from Jackson to Mentone, Alabama. We've all spent our first night in Sue's small log cabin, and he is now returning to North Carolina. With my father, a physician, leaving, there is no professional medical care available any longer until someone from hospice visits. In other words, this is our first time being on our own. Ultimately, my Aunt Jean bears the weight of that responsibility, and it seems evident in her behavior as she is in and out of Sue's room and on the phone trying to organize things. Meanwhile Anne and my cousin Emmy are taking more time to visit with Sue and to tend to her other needs.

During the scene, I leave with my father to drive him to Chattanooga, Tennessee (an hour and a half away), so that he can get a rental car to return to North Carolina and so that I can pick up my Aunt Jean's eldest son, Jack, and his twin daughters to bring them back to see Sue. Jean is briefly on the phone with me during the scene.

The transcription depicts conversation occurring in the early afternoon while I am away. I use ellipses at two points, but, other than those omissions, the rest of the twenty-minute conversation is recorded in the transcript. As in Chapter I, the transcription is interrupted by reflections. It is conversation that could easily be described as "chit-chat" and might appear superfluous. In a section of *You Just Don't Understand* entitled "Small talk serves a big purpose," Tannen explains, "Women friends and relatives keep the conversational mechanisms in working order by talking about small things as well as large. Knowing they will have such conversations later makes women feel they are not alone in life."[37] This scene exemplifies the patterns of conversation occurring during the times between the heavier or more obviously profound moments of Sue's death. For both Sue as she faces her own death and for the other women as they face their own grief, it is important to not feel alone during this time. The conversational style and ease displayed in this scene shows the camaraderie and the comfort that these women found in being together. Essentially, this scene is about caregiving and the quotidian details of a good death.

Mary Catherine Bateson posits that "Attention and empathy are skills, rather than biological givens for all women. Caring can be learned by all human beings, can be worked into

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[37] Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 102.

the design of every life, meeting an individual need as well as a pervasive need in society."[38] In this scene, Sue's sister Anne, my cousin Emmy, and my Aunt Jean display the skill of attention and care. All of these women learned some of these skills by Sue's example. Sue also continues to pay attention and care for the others within the scene, telling them to be careful, asking how they are doing, and taking interest in what they will find to eat.

Chad (C): You've been eating today, too. Haven't you?
Jean (J): A lot.
Sue (S): (Laughter)
C: Yeah, that's wonderful. So just eating is building up the proteins in her body so she can absorb the fluids. So just eating a little bit is doing a good job. It has been such a pleasure to see you settled back in.
S: Oh I love ya, I love ya, I love ya.
C: I love you, Sue.
S: Take care.
C: I look forward to Jane getting down here. I know she can't wait to get back.
S: Well, I know it.
C: She'll bring the kids down to Camp and get to see you.
S: But tell her—not to fret, all is well.
C: Yep, you got, you got the Coreys and Kate here with ya.
S: Right.
C: Not to mention Anne.
S: Exactly.
C: Alright, well I'm gonna take off to North Carolina.
S: You be careful.
C: I'll do that.
J: Ok, oh, Chad, I, really you were so good.
C: Oh. Sue, it's so nice to see this succeed.
J: I know.
C: To see Sue settled here at home where she belongs.
J: You know because last time we saw you was that terrible night in the hospital.
S: Yeah, not fun.
C: That was not a night worth remembering.
J: Ok, I won't mention it.
C: (Laughter) Y'all take care. Love you, Sue.

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[38] Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Pr, 1989), 161.

"Not a night worth remembering"—Chad

Every morning when Sue woke up she wanted to sing the hymn, "Morning is Broken." Since she had been sick, she had increasingly loved the mornings and hated the nights. Breathing was hard at night.

Early on, she had one bad night where she struggled for hours with everyone thinking she was going to die. This is the night that my father and aunt mention. The night my father said is "not a night worth remembering." It was after that night that my mother told me I should come to Jackson immediately. But on the morning following that terrible night, Sue said to my mother, "Jane, you know, I almost died last night, and it wasn't bad, it wasn't bad at all."

~

Emmy (E): See ya later. Do you have Jack's address for Kate?
J: Well I would except I don't know it. I'm gonna call her, I'm gonna call you, Kate, later, ok?
Kate (K): Ok.
J: After I call him.
(I leave to drive my father to get a rental car in Chattanooga, Tennessee and to pick up my cousin Jack)

"Address for Kate?"—Emmy

Overall, I spent a substantial amount of time in the car those two weeks. Regularly, I was sent out to get food. In this case, I had a forty-five minute drive ahead of me to Chattanooga and I realized I was the only one who wanted to make the trip. I think driving was a coping mechanism for me. It made me feel like I was doing something.

I enjoy driving, but I have no sense of direction. One night in the hospital, I was told that while I'd been out foraging for fast food to bring back to the hospital, Sue had said, "You know, that Sarah isn't swift." She was mixing people's names up then, but they all knew she was talking about me. I wasn't swift that day. I got lost for hours. I kind of planned to. I needed space to process being with someone while they died.

I could be by myself during those drives and think about my time with Sue. The last time I had a good one-on-one visit with Sue was the Easter before she died. It was the last time I saw her before she was in the hospital. I was in my sophomore year of college and I didn't know what I was doing for the holiday. Sue lived only an hour and a half away from me, but I was having trouble deciding if I should go. I was debating between visiting Sue and what now seems like the trivial alternative of homework. In retrospect, I know I made the right decision. Part of my trepidation came from not wanting to impose myself, but mostly I didn't want to spend the night, because that sounded intimidating. What if I said something wrong? What if I was inappropriate? What if I had nothing to say at all? What if I picked up a magazine, or checked my watch, or somehow didn't pay attention to everything she said? Everyone seemed to become so easily wrapped in conversation with her. What if that didn't happen with me?

When my mother was in college she visited Sue often, and her best college memories are weekends spent at Sue's house. I didn't expect it to be like that. I thought it would be uncomfortable. So I decided not to spend the night and to just go up for the afternoon on Sunday. She invited me to her church's sunrise service. I understood why Jesus had to rise early, but I didn't understand why we had to celebrate in kind, so I told her I would arrive in time for lunch. Later, my mother told me Sue thought my decision to skip church on Easter was funny, but Sue never said anything to me. I thought that was gracious of her, otherwise I would have felt self-conscious about it during our visit.

We went to a friend's bed and breakfast for lunch. The place is about ten minutes away from Sue's house. In the car on the way to lunch, she asked about my classes. Discussing my courses with her allowed me to feel intelligent and competent. I had quickly entered that place of comfort and ease of conversation that I had been worried might not be there for me. I saw how

irrational my fears were. Sue made me want to show her the best form of myself. I think everyone who interacted with her would say the same. She wasn't critical. She was calm and the way she carried herself was inspiring. Being in her presence gave me a taste of what that kind of peace of mind was like, and it encouraged me to work to create that kind of serenity in my own life.

I told her one of my favorite classes was "African American Images in the Media" taught by Nathan McCall. She replied intently, "I think Nathan McCall is a pointedly wise man." She told me she had read his books and had given one of them to my cousin when he was moving to Atlanta for college. I was impressed and surprised that she knew who my professor was. It gave me a new appreciation for my university to think that I had professors whose work Sue had read. Sue read widely and constantly, and her reading was inexorably connected to her life. She was particularly committed to American literature, claiming that she found it good for her soul to read Moby Dick once a year. Besides Herman Melville, she loved the great American novelists of the twentieth century: Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner.[39] She had framed photographs of both Hemingway and Faulkner on a wall in her office. Their pictures were enormous, and imposing; many visitors to Sue's cabin commented on them assuming they were Sue's grandfathers.

In *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind,* four women authors write together to discuss the various perspectives on women's voice they discovered through interviews with 135 women. For the final perspective, the authors describe "constructed knowledge" as the integration of the other levels of voice. At this level, women are no longer

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[39] John Whitley, Howard Temperley and Chris Bigsby, *A New Introduction to American Studies* (New York: Longman, 2005), 224.

silent nor do they rely completely on a voice of authority or outside knowledge or their own intuition. The women blend these types of knowledge. Sue had a constructivist way of knowing. The authors write, "What stands out most strongly in narratives of constructivist women…is their desire to have 'a room of one's own,' as Virginia Woolf calls it, in a family and community and world that they helped make livable. They reveal in the way they speak and live their lives their moral conviction that ideas and values, like children, must be nurtured, cared for, placed in environments that help them grow."[40]

After we discussed my classes, Sue changed the subject to some of her friends, a young couple on the mountain, and their difficult job decisions. The man was training to be a pilot and she explained the process to me. She was interested in everything.

~

Back in Mentone, Sue commented on my father to Emmy:

S: He is a good man.
E: He really is, isn't he?
S: You know I told him I was so glad he came because he seemed to be acknowledging he was family to me and I liked that.
E: He stepped up.
S: Yeah, oh big time, big time.
S: Emmy.
E: Ok. Here ya go. You're juggling a lot on that stomach, you want me to hold that soup for a second?
S: This is good. Yeah. Ooo.
E: Not working out?
S: Well, it's gonna grow.
E: Ok. When we had Sprite the other day, you know how they always had at the hospital, did that feel good? Do you remember?
S: Uh-uh.
E: You didn't like it?
S: I don't remember how I felt.
E: Oh, ok. 'Cause that could be a good thing.

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[40] Mary Field Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger and Jill Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 152.

S: Yeah.
E: Yeah, this is a good chair.
S: Uh-huh.
E: I'm gonna go say bye to Chad real quick.
S: Good.
E: Can you hear Anne?
S: Uh-huh. (laughter)
E: I think she's having the time of her life right now.
S: I do, too. Good time.

"This is good"—Sue

In the scene above, Emmy works to make Sue more comfortable and to find a way to provide for her in some form. Carol Gilligan argues that women follow an ethic of care. Women feel a responsibility to care and are guided by consideration of personal relationships in ethical matters. At times, this ethic of care can lead to a denial of self in order to fulfill the responsibility a person feels to care for others. Gilligan writes, "The truth of relationships, however, return in the rediscovery of connection, in the realization that self and other are interdependent and that life, however valuable in itself, can only be sustained by care in relationships."[41] In this situation, life was literally being sustained by care to whatever extent that was possible. The women in this scene care for Sue out of love. The understanding that this type of care is the way to express that love arises from an ethic of care.

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(Anne enters)
E: Hello, Annie Anne!
Anne (A): I'm not gonna sit. I'm gonna eat something. Sue, you eating?!
S: I'm eating taco soup.
A: I mean!
E: And drinking Diet Dr. Pepper.

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41 Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, 29th printing ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 127.

A: And she likes taco soup. When was it, Sue, when we had something and we were gonna have taco soup?
S: I don't remember.
E: What's that stuff y'all make with the Fritos? That's what I like.
S: That's Frito salad.
A: Oh, taco salad, I love those. I do.
E: We ate that after Bertha's funeral last year. It was good.
A: Oh yeah, that's good.
S: Anne, that would be easy for us.
E: Do you think you could eat it?
S: Maybe not.
E: Fritos are kinda, you know.
A: I suspect potato salad would be better. Or a potato. We got some pretty potatoes we can put in the microwave.
E: Do you like macaroni and cheese? No? I wondered about that.
A: I do.
S: Mother made delicious macaroni and cheese.
A: Uh-huh, Mother did.
E: So does Kraft.
A: Sue, I'm gonna get Emmy to straighten us out.
S: On?
A: Somebody told me, well I can't think who it was, oh I'll tell you who, Sue's child Mary, Mary…
S: McNamara.
[PLAY CLIP 3 to listen to the recording of the previous section beginning with a small portion of the section before it.]

"Sue's child Mary"—Anne

Mary McNamara, Sue's friend, is from Cleveland. Sue and Mary met in Kentucky after Sue retired from Camp and began working at the Central Appalachian Project (CAP). In this part of the conversation, we see that through Sue, Mary found her way to a funeral in Alabama. Sue brought people together.

There are a few items that gained importance to Sue throughout her last two weeks. One in particular was a strand of prayer beads that Mary brought with her to the hospital to give to Sue. Mary made the prayer beads on the flight coming down from Cleveland. She made the prayer beads out of large ceramic beads from Kenya in beautiful orange and pink hues.

Mary is Catholic. She tried to explain the rosary to us. I think Anne was a bit uncomfortable with that. We tried to make our own prayer beads. Most of us lost ours. Sue held on to hers. She had it with her for most of the end of her life. They seemed to be soothing to her. Mary McNamara understood Sue well as a friend. The prayer beads were the last thing to be put away in Sue's room after she died, and they were returned to Mary.

During Mary McNamara's visit, Sue asked her pointedly, "Now, what are you going to do about your church?" By "your church," Sue meant the Catholic Church, in its entirety. She had a lot of faith in people's ability to affect change. She was asking her friend, a female layperson in the church, what she intended to do about one of the biggest institutions in the world. She wasn't asking her to change denominations; she was simply asking her to work on the difficulties she saw in the Catholic Church.

~

Anne continues:

A: Yeah, Mary McNamara told me she met me at Bertha's funeral.
E: Yeah.
A: All right now, I came after the funeral. I didn't get to go to the funeral.
E: I remember that. 'Cause remember we sat at the table and we ate lunch.
A: Did we?
(Jean enters)
J to S: Do you think you would eat a smoothie? I'm going to tell Kate to get some fruit, 'cause we can put protein in a smoothie. Wouldn't that be good?
J to K on phone: That would be great for you to get.
E to A: Yeah, I remember that, 'cause remember we sat at the table and we ate lunch. Mary came afterward and we visited afterward.
A to E: Did we?
E to A: It was so brief.
A: I did not remember meeting her.
E: Yeah, 'cause there were a lot of people coming in and out of Sue's.
A: Where'd they eat? You said we ate.
E: We just at the kitchen table. The family ate over there at Moon Lake Baptist.
A: Oh, did they? Moon Lake Baptist?
E: Yeah, 'cause remember Bertha had, like, four funerals.
[PLAY CLIP 4 to listen to the recording of the previous section.]

"A lot of people coming in and out of Sue's"—Emmy

Bertha was a member of the Mentone Community. Unlike Bertha and her four funerals, Sue only had three. There exists an amazing sense of community in that town of five hundred people. It is a set of factors I will never fully understand. I didn't grow up with, but it is a kind of network I am glad to have witnessed. Sue was crucial to her small rural community in many ways.

Some of the members of this community that Sue was closest with were her neighbors, the McMunns. Sue and Kathy McMunn belonged to the same book club and were both avid readers. Kathy and one of her daughters made the seven-hour drive to Jackson to see Sue in the hospital. Kathy stayed at the hospital with Sue that night so that my Aunt Jean could take a break and get some sleep. Usually, Jean stayed up pretty much all night and went back to a family friend's house during the day to take a nap, but Kathy settled into her hospital chair and went sound to sleep. The next day, Sue kept saying, "Kathy was making Zs!" Sue did not like being alone and awake through the long hours of the hospital night, and hadn't expected her caregiver to sleep more than she did, but she tried to have a sense of humor about it. She loved her neighbors.

In *Women Growing Older: Psychological Perspectives*, Lillian E. Troll has a chapter entitled "Family Connectedness of Old Women: Attachments in Later Life." Troll describes how, as opposed to psychologists who deplore dependency in the name of independence, social gerontologists "introduced *disengagement* as the opposite of connectedness and social

involvement (Cumming and Henry, 1961)."[42] Connection is found to be a good thing as older people who are still socially involved experience greater life satisfaction than older people who lack social connection.[43] Sue's rich social life was an important part of her joy in life. It was a social life that continued to be rich even after she retired and grew older. As a single woman living alone in a small town in the Appalachian Mountains, it is unlikely that Sue would have had as active a social life as she did. Many of her closest friends lived hundreds of miles away from her, and she had to be intentional in sustaining those relationships.

The wide array of Sue's friends became evident when a Facebook group started, "Pray for Sue Henry." My cousin Emmy was livid when she saw the group. I guess Emmy thought it was in bad taste. I didn't care much either way. It was probably inevitable. I looked at it the other day: 343 members. I expected more, but then again it has been nearly two years now since Sue died. I sympathized with Emmy at the time. I think she wanted a private grief. I know she wanted to be able to grieve without distraction. Everyone wanted information, but we didn't have very much and we didn't know what to say. We didn't know how much we knew or how much would change in the next few hours. Something about the attention and the request for information seemed to take away from Emmy's experience with Sue. Whatever the reason, it was hard. With Facebook covering so much of life, I just didn't think it was unexpected. But I know it wasn't Sue's style.

~

Anne says she does remember Bertha who had four funerals:

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42 Barbara Turner and Lillian Troll, eds., *Women Growing Older: Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Barbara F. Turner and Lillian E. Troll (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc, 1993), 171.

43 Ibid., 171.

A: Yeah. Uh-huh! Well. I know I wasn't here then, but I came. .
S: From where?
E: That's what I'm trying to remember is where she was coming from.
A: Yeah. I came and it was over.
E: But you didn't drive yourself. Did you?

"But you didn't drive yourself. Did you?"—Emmy

Sue's sister Anne liked to drive herself to and from the hospital. She lived about half an hour outside of Jackson in a town called Madison. Anne's driving scared all of us. She couldn't get very far without her walker. Her hands were bent up with arthritis. I started driving Anne back at night and picking her up in the mornings. I didn't know Anne very well, but we got to spend some time together on the trips and I learned a lot about her then. Our refrain throughout the two weeks was about how good it was that we got to spend time together and what a special time it was, and it was true. During our drives I'd ask Anne questions about her childhood, the things she liked, and her work. She was easy to listen to; she had a lot to say. She'd give answers that involved long stories. Most of all I loved hearing her language. Perhaps even more than Sue's, Anne's language was rich with phrases I'd never heard before. I remember the first day I drove her home. We got in the car, and a squirrel ran in front of us. "He sure did hop on his mule." It was the only time I found a squirrel running in front of my car interesting.

One day we talked a at length about their childhood. She talked about parties and dances and getting dressed up for them. Anne said that she was more interested in social events than Sue had been. She referred to herself as the prissy one, and Sue as more of the tomboy. I don't know if those are the terms she used, but that was the gist of it. She talked about elementary school days when everyone would give each other Valentine's Day cards. She said Sue would get lots and she didn't get very many. She didn't seem jealous, she seemed more proud. I think pride is

easier to come by, since Anne had been married. I don't know if that's true, but it seemed that way to me.

By the time I dropped Anne off, I was usually grateful for what I had learned. She had a unique perspective on Sue's life, and it was one I wanted to hear about. I'm ashamed to say, I was also grateful that the trip was over. The pressure of building this new relationship with Anne in the midst of the intensity of Sue's dying was exhausting. I didn't have all of the social ease of my mother, aunt, or cousin when it came to one on one conversation with Anne. In time, I grew to love her, and it became more natural. I liked making the trip back to Jackson and the hospital by myself. I liked having time to think. Although I did spend a lot of time lost between Madison and Jackson.

~

The women continue discussing Bertha's funeral:

A: How long ago was that?
E: It was a year ago.
A: Just a year ago.
J: How did you get here? Well, I bet there were a million people coming from around there. I bet they gave you a ride. Don't you think?
A: But I had just gotten to the mountain.
E: She did just get here.
S: Yeah.
J: Oh, you were already here?
E: No. Uh uh.
A: I think I had just got here.
J to K on phone: Hey Kate, why don't you get . . .
S: Did you come with Janet and Tony?
A: No, I don't think that was in October.
E: Who are Janet and Eddie?
A: Oh, that's a couple that come every October, or whatever, yeah it's October, to the festival,
E: Ohhhhhh.
A: Uh-huh. Since their son was a little boy and he graduated from high school this year.
E: Ohhhh. Are they from Mississippi?
A: Yeah. Uh-huh. They're from Florence and they help me with everything that I need help with. They're just real, real nice to me. And it seems to me that, I don't know, I don't know what.
E to S: Take it away?

S: Yes.
E: Was it good?
S: Yes.
A to S: Did you have enough, Susie?
S: Yes, is that what you're going to eat?
E to A: Do you want some of this?
A: Taco soup? I'm going to eat something.
E: I'll heat you up some Taco soup.
A: I'll see what they had. Sit. I'll find something more appealing.
S: What?
A: I'll see if I find something more appealing. Did Sarah speak to you?
E: Yeah. She came.
A: I wanted her to see how pretty the back looked. I thought it looked like it had just been mowed.
E to S: Here you go.
S: Oh Emmy, I'll try a little more.
E: Dr. Pepper?
S: Uh-huh.
A: I'll tell you. You're acting like you're in Mentone.
S: I know it.
E: You don't have to drink it.
S: That's good.
E: It's probably very little nutritional value to it, so how about some water?
S: I'm good.
E: Ok.
A: Susie, it's wonderful to see you eating.
E: I know.
J: I know.
S: I know.
(Emmy and Jean leave)

"It's wonderful to see you eating"—Anne

Madeleine L'Engle writes about being with her 90-year-old mother as she dies in *The Summer of the Great-Grandmother* and writes, "She had that spontaneous quality of aliveness which illuminates people who have already done a lot of their dying, and I think I am beginning to understand the truth of that." [44] Sue was at this point of aliveness and light during the first half

[44] Madeleine L'engle, *The Summer of the Great-Grandmother (Crosswicks Journal, Book 2)* (New York: HarperOne, 1984), 180.

of the week we spent in her house before she died. She had been through the work of the hospital and was, as Anne put it, acting like she was in Mentone. Those were joyful days.

Physically, Sue was completely vulnerable, and we wanted to help in any way we could. I was always looking, somewhat anxiously, for some physical act to do for her. All of the other women present worked at caring for Sue with the same vigor. Frankly, figuring out ways to make her feel better was exciting.

Once we discovered something that worked, whether it was a certain food that she could tolerate or a way to reposition her, we were enthusiastic about doing those tasks for her. Death is a physical process. That seems obvious, but with her during that time I was struck by how much of our conversation related to her physical needs. I know that shouldn't be surprising as she was rapidly dying of cancer, but it was just so different than most of the conversations I've heard Sue have. It wasn't tedious by any means; all of us were completely concerned and interested. But while the conversation wasn't dull, in listening to my recordings, I realize that we did talk more about things like Chapstick and neck pillows and washcloths than I would have remembered. Seemingly small acts seemed to make a huge difference at that point. Perhaps it wasn't that Sue necessarily felt significantly better after we did something for her, but I know that we did. After doing anything that might lead to even the slightest improvement in her comfort level, we felt a huge sense of accomplishment. Sue had an expression for that sense of accomplishment after a day of good work. She would say, "We killed bears today!"

Sue had a million phrases that stuck with Camp. By using her language, campers and staff remember Sue and continue to thread her legacy through daily life at Camp DeSoto, and in the many other places where she continues to be quoted. One of her most recited phrases is, "DeSoto girls are unapologetically square." When she says it with her Mississippi accent, square

becomes roughly three syllables. Sounds something like squire. When I was a camper, the director of the camp, Phil, still used it in his talks. Phil had to explain the meaning of "square." The phrase was too old for most of us. At DeSoto, there is a square dance every summer with Camp Alpine for Boys, another summer camp in Mentone If a boy asks a girl to leave the gym and "go to the water fountain," supposedly the code for trying to step away from the party to try and make a move, the girl is supposed to respond with "DeSoto girls are unapologetically square." It was never an issue for anyone I knew. "DeSoto girls don't get thirsty" is an alternative response.

~

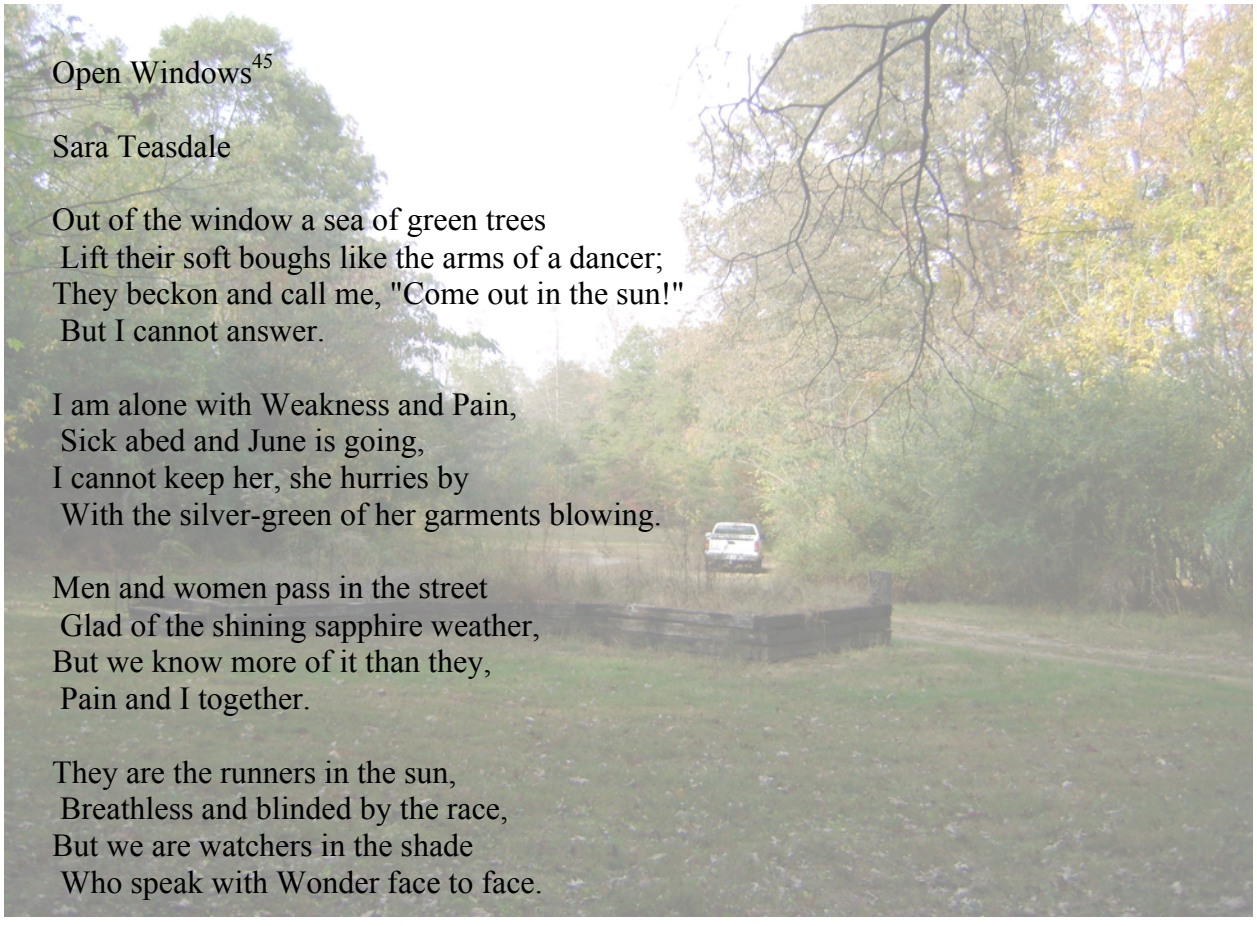
A: Susie, It's wonderful to see you eating. Just wonderful to see you eating. Do you feel all right?
S: I feel good. How do you feel?
(Anne moves towards the lever on Sue's bed.)
A: I'm going to let you down. You kinda look high.
S: Yeah, do let me down. How do you feel?
A: I feel fine. Now. Took my medicine. Found my, oh please excuse me, found my heating pad.
S: Oh good.
A: Yeah, I was glad to find my heating pad.
S: That's good.
A: Is that enough?
S: Uh-huh.
A: Ok. All right, it's right here. Let me find some me some. . . Now, here's your rosary.
A (looking out window): Oh look how pretty it looks.
S: Isn't it just gorgeous?
A: I just knew that if.
S: Yeah.
A: Oh, isn't that just precious.
[PLAY CLIP 5 to listen to the recording of the previous section.]

"Isn't it just gorgeous?"—Sue

Sue and Anne are discussing the view from Sue's bedroom window. Sue loved nature. Every morning in her hospital room, she asked someone to open the blinds. When we arrived in

Mentone and Sue was settled in her bed, she looked out the window and said, “I’m sure there’s a prettier view somewhere, but I can’t think of one.”

After Sue retired as director of Camp DeSoto in 1995, she began teaching a poetry class as an activity for fifteen and sixteen year-old girls who were in their last year at Camp. As an English teacher and an avid reader, Sue valued poetry. Most of the poems she selected for her classes involve appreciating nature and its beauty. In 2005, she chose to teach thirteen poems. One of the poems was “Open Windows” by Sara Teasdale, an American poet.



View from Sue's bedroom window

[45] Sara Teasdale, ed., *The Columbia Anthology of American Poetry*, 0 ed., ed. Jay Parini (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 352.

In some ways, the poem parallels Sue's experience with looking at nature through her window as she died. Like Teasdale, Sue experienced weakness and pain as she looked out to sunlit green trees in June. Sue, however, did not experience the loneliness expressed by Teasdale.[46] Sue thoroughly enjoyed viewing nature. She was uplifted by the sight of her backyard rather than frustrated with not being able to go outside. In her last days, Sue particularly mirrored Teasdale's last lines, "But we are watchers in the shade/ Who speak with Wonder face to face." Sue spoke often during her last days about being face to face with God.

~

Anne continues to make sure Sue is comfortable:

A: Now would you like your news on?
S: A Kleenex would help me.
A: Hmm?
S: Kleenex.
A: Ok. You got one right by your side. I kind of need one or two myself. I've been kind of sniffling. Here you go. Oh my goodness. Wait just a minute. Now, can you get it? I'll throw it away.
S: Thank you.
A: Do you want your TV on or do you want to rest just a little?
S: I don't believe I want it on now.
A: Oh. Ok. I'd rest a while if I were you.
S: And now you're going to take a nap?
A: Yeah. But I'm going to eat something.
S: Ok.
A: I'm kind of hungry.
S: Good.
A: I had some grits for breakfast, but that didn't do it.
S: Oh, Anne.
A: I know it. Just didn't do it.
S: That's pitiful.
A: Can you imagine such a thing?
S: I just love grits.
A: I know it. I knew that.
S: What's the name of it?
A: It's your kind, with the, well not. I put my own butter, you know, put my own good butter with it.

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[46] The poet committed suicide in 1933.

S: Uh-huh.
A: And well they sprinkle a little cheese on it. That was good. I don't need that. I just like.
. . .
A: Now, Sue; are you warm enough if you go to sleep?
S: No, I'm going to pull it up.
A: Ok. You put it.
S: That's good.
A: Ok. Well, I'm going to get me something to eat.
S: Go and get something to eat.
A: Yeah.
S: And get a good one.
[PLAY CLIP 6 to listen to the recording of a portion of the previous section.]

"Are you warm enough if you go to sleep?"—Anne

We can feel the closeness and warmth between Sue and Anne. Although they lived seven hours apart, they managed to stay in close contact and talked on the phone for an hour every day at 5:30 pm. Troll says that siblings are close when they leave their parents home and go through a distancing phase during middle age, "…but old people rate affectional closeness with siblings higher and conflict lower than do middle-aged."[47] Sue and Anne differed from this pattern in that their middle years were not characterized by any greater degree of conflict compared to the serenity that characterizes their relationship at the end of Sue's life. Both women readily talk about the differences in their personalities, but this was not a source of conflict.

In *Womenfolks: Growing Up Down South*, Shirley Abbott says "sisterhood" was becoming a popular notion during 1960s feminist movements and writes, "But sisterhood was nothing new to me. It has been a zealously guarded secret among Southern women for years.

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[47] Barbara Turner and Lillian Troll, eds., *Women Growing Older: Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Barbara F. Turner and Lillian E. Troll (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc, 1993), 176.

Next to motherhood, sisterhood is what they value most, taking an endless pleasure in the daily, commonplace society of one another…"[48]

Anne and Sue

Sue and Anne valued each other deeply. They were good sisters. The sense of sisterhood in this scene reaches beyond Sue and Anne's relationship, however, and we can see how all of the women enjoyed each other's company. Part of that sense of sisterhood comes from the good example set by the oldest pair of sisters, Sue and Anne. Moreover, we were all able to feel a part of the same sisterhood because of the respect shown to one another. Emmy and I both had about sixty years less life experience than either Sue or Anne, yet the older women valued our opinions equally. Anne would ask about the "girls" or sometimes the "young girls," and she was usually referring to my mother and my aunt and to not Emmy and me. The women did not have an age bias. My mother told me that Sue came to see me as a peer during her death. I first and foremost call Sue my godmother, but as I came to know her better in her dying, she shifted in my mind from being a revered woman to being a dear friend. I loved her either why, but I'm glad to have known her as both.

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Sue asks about her nephew, Ed, calling:

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[48] Shirley Abbott, *Womenfolks: Growing Up Down South* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1998), 167.

. . .
S: And so Ed called?
A: Ed called. And I've got to kind of try to get Frances Anne. I hadn't gotten her. I'll keep trying.
S: Was he sweet?
A: So sweet. And he said. I never did know what it did to me to see Ganny. Wasn't that what he called you?
S: Really?
A: Yeah. He's your grandchild.
S: Uh.
A: Well, kinda. You know.
S: Uh.
A: Now, I guess he called mother Ganny.
S: Yeah. I'm willing to try that stuff once more.
A: Not the water? Dr. Pepper? Huh? It's cold. Can you drink it out of a can?
S: Uh uh. (no)
A: Well, I'll go and get you a glass.
S: Well, there's one here.
A: It's got water in it, though. She must have taken it back. I'll go and get you a glass. Won't be a bit of trouble.
S: Much.
A: It won't be a bit of trouble. I'll get you a straw.

"It won't be a bit of trouble"—Anne

Emmy enters and begins tending to Sue's needs in the same ways as Anne has, asking her the same questions and adjusting the height of her bed as Anne did. Jean enters soon after to give Sue medication. An intergenerational system of care is in action. Sue's house is filled with books and the living room has shelves of books on every wall, lining the walls like wallpaper. After Sue died, I was standing in her living room with my mother. My mother pulled *Tending to Virginia* by Jill McCorkle off the shelf. She handed it to me, and said I needed to read it, that it would help me process what I had just been through. I didn't understand the connections initially as the book is about a woman going through a difficult pregnancy. As the story unfolded, however, I saw that the book was also about several generations of women in the South coming together to care for one of their own in need. Although the crisis was different, the inclination to

be with one another during a difficult time and the connectedness of the women resonates with my experience.

Troll states, "Research on human connectedness, bonding, or attachment—whichever term one prefers—informs us that women's connectedness with others seems to be more extensive and stronger than men's."[49] Towards the end of the chapter, Troll highlights the difference between attachment and attachment behaviors to say that while women appear to be more attached it might be that their attachment is expressed in a more visible way, "Women may do more visiting and helping, but men may do as much thinking about relatives."[50] Anne and Emmy's attachment is obvious as there is much in their behavior that indicates an attachment to Sue. They are certainly visiting and helping.

~

Emmy enters, talking about Sue's Dr. Pepper:

E: Uh-huh. The bubbles are probably.
S: That's good. You can leave it here.
E: I'll leave it here next to you. Need anything else?
S: Not a thing.
E: You're looking pretty tired. Are you tired?
S: Well, yeah, I'm going to take a little nap.
E: All right. I think you can do that! Just let us know what you need. Ok?
S: Ok.
E. Do you want to go down? Up?
S: I think I'll go down.
E: Ok, down more? Perfect? Alrighty. Have a good rest.
(Jean enters)
J: Can I give you your mouth stuff real quick before you go to sleep?
S: Ok.
J: I hope I don't spill. Oops, I did. Oops. Swish it. You don't swallow it, right?
J: Are you going to go to sleep now?

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49 Barbara Turner and Lillian Troll, eds., *Women Growing Older: Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Barbara F. Turner and Lillian E. Troll (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc, 1993), 169.

50 Ibid., 196.

S: Are you going to wipe my mouth?
J: I am.

"Are you going to wipe my mouth?"—Sue

We were confident about Sue's appreciation of our efforts to make her more comfortable. At the same time, she almost seemed to expect it. She was openly grateful, but she also seemed unsurprised by our attentiveness. I think she trusted in our ability and desire to care for her. I saw two qualities in Sue that allowed her to possess this kind of trust: she was a secure person and she expected the best of people.

At Camp, we often sing a song called "Sister, let me be your servant." One of the lines is, "Pray that I might have the grace to let you be my servant, too." I came to understand that grace as I watched Sue die. She didn't ask for much. Rather than making requests, it was more likely that she would be accepting our offers. She was a thoroughly independent woman and had lived alone most of her life, but she easily accepted the care we offered. After living a life of serving others, she had the grace to let us serve her, too.

~

Anne enters:

A: I thought the phone was in here. Is it?
J: Well, we took it out, because it kept on ringing and bothering her.
A: Ok, well I'll go find it then. I kind a thought maybe I'd be more assured of Frances Anne.
S: I'm so glad you've got something to look for. (Laughter).
J: Is everything good?
S: Uh-huh.
J: Ok.

"I'm so glad you found something to look for"—Sue

Throughout the last two weeks of Sue's life, she had a running joke with all of us about the amount of time we spent searching for lost items. Surely, we lost more things during that

period as a result of the bewilderment we were all feeling. I also think that the menial task of looking for some item was soothing to some as it us something to do that we could control.

We all had strategies for coping. Sue's friend Poppy cleaned. She went through everything. The cupboards in Sue's living room were full of old papers. She didn't have many knick-knacks or much finery, so she had room to keep all of her old letters and pictures. Poppy went through her cupboards like a machine. I was constantly behind her asking her not to throw things away; scared we might lose something important. Sue's niece Frances Anne organized. She was getting things ready, getting Sue's affairs in order. Sue's sister Anne tried to do the same, so she and Frances Anne worked together. My Aunt Jean was on the phone some of the time trying to figure out the logistics of the rest of her family's traveling. Emmy sorted through pictures. That was joyous. We separated them into bags and picked out ones to give to the people from whom they came or for whom they would have special meaning. And I scanned. I scanned tirelessly. I scanned everything. I scanned pictures and news articles. While we were there, I made online photo albums of what I scanned and sent them to Sue's friends and family. I was in the kitchen scanning the moment Sue died. Frances Anne and Anne were in her room with her. Emmy was looking through pictures, Poppy was cleaning, my mother was taking a nap on the porch, and I was scanning.

The day after Sue died, my mother went to the Dollar General store down the mountain. The store was about fifteen minutes away. She went and bought random things. It took me awhile to understand the real reason she went. She told me later, "You know if you need somewhere to cry, the Dollar General parking lot is a great spot." People on the mountain call it the DG mall. I had spent the summer before in Mentone as a cabin counselor learning how to care for six girls just starting middle school. Considering the delicacy of the moment, I thought it

would be rude to tell my mother that I had found plenty of my own good crying spots, and one's with far better views. We were on a mountain after all. I had never considered the Dollar General parking lot. It made me feel better that she was crying. I was worried that I hadn't seen it yet. I don't know why she couldn't cry in front of us, but I think it had something to do with my younger sister.

My mother had arrived with my younger brother and sister, Joe and Bui, the night before Sue died. Bui was about to start Camp. The day after Sue died, I was standing in the driveway in front of her cabin when the camp nurse happened to walk by. The nurse told me that my mother had forgotten to send Bui's forms for her Claritin and that she would need to send the forms before Camp started. My parents always forgot to send the forms before Camp started.

I wanted to kick her in the teeth. That's another phrase I learned from Sue by way of my mother. Sue had just died. Didn't the nurse know my mom was crying at the Dollar General store?

But truer than that anger, was sadness.

A year later, my mother and I were talking about sadness, true and deep sadness. She told me she hadn't been sad since her mother died when she was sixteen. That was until Sue died. Then she was sad for a while. My whole family was. My brother Rob and I were especially sad like that, too. I heard it takes about a year to get over a major loss. I think that's about right. I said as much to one of my friends. She was offended; she said you never get over a great loss. I got her point, but I don't think she got mine. Sue did her best work to leave us with peace, to leave us knowing that the end was good, that life was good, that we needed to have joy in it. Still, we were sad. I keep holding on to what I witnessed as a good death, and I believe that it was one. But it was still a death. It was still a loss.

CHAPTER III
Worship

"Truly, we've seen it"
—Anne Henry Harvey

Setting: Sue Henry's home in Mentone, Alabama

Characters:

Sue Henry (S)

Myself (K)—Sue's goddaughter, Emmy's cousin, and Jean's niece

Emmy Corey (E)—Sue's goddaughter, my cousin, and Jean's daughter

Jean Corey (J)—Sue's longtime friend and mentee, my aunt, and Emmy's mother

Anne Harvey (A)—Sue's sister

Poppy Buchanan (P)—Sue's friend and former high-school English student

Event: Church Service on May 31, 2009 (Pentecost Sunday)

[PLAY CLIP 7 to listen to the recording of this scene in its entirety (eleven minutes) or wait to listen to a shorter CLIP 8 (one minute) later in the chapter.]

The entirety of Sue's dying might best be described as an act of worship. All of the elements of a traditional Christian service occurred in abundance during the final weeks of her life; prayer, the espousal of wisdom, the expression of love, the singing of hymns, the asking for and receiving of forgiveness, the preaching of good news, the passing of peace.

On Sue's last Sunday, we held church in her bedroom. My cousin Emmy, my aunt Jean, Sue's sister Anne, Sue's friend Poppy, and I gathered around Sue's bed to conduct an

improvisational church service. I have divided the scene in such a way that it resembles a structured church service, although the actual unfolding of the service occurred in a more spontaneous way as is evident in the transcriptions. There is a call to worship, prayer for Pentecost, reading from scripture, closing prayer, the Lord's Prayer, hymn, and Sue's prayer at the end of the service serves as the benediction. The scene covers a period of eleven minutes and I have included it in its entirety.

~

Call To Worship

We'd spent a good deal of the morning shuffling about, talking about how we would have our own church service, wandering in and out of the room, changing subjects. Sue, always a natural leader, determined she needed to initiate the service:

Sue (S): Ok, let's go.
Kate (K): All right. Emmy, you order it. Who's going first?
Emmy (E): Oh, I think you're the call to worship.
K: I'm the call to worship? Okay. Is she getting a Bible?
Jean (J): No, she's, we're okay.
K: Okay, so I can. Sue, this is the Emily Dickinson poem you had us read in poetry class at Camp.
S: All right!
K: With me and Catherine Hawkins and Anna.
S: Yeah.
K: Okay.
Some keep the Sabbath going to church;
I keep it staying at home,
With a bobolink for a chorister,
And an orchard for a dome.

Some keep the Sabbath in surplice;
I just wear my wings,
And instead of tolling the bell for church,
Our little sexton sings.

God preaches, —a noted clergyman, —
And the sermon is never long;

So instead of getting to heaven at last,
I'm going all along![51]

S: All right!
E: Mmm, I like that.
Anne (A): That was very good.
S: Real good.

~

Prayer for Pentecost

A: Is everybody reading their favorites?
E: I guess so.
J: I'm just reading the Pentecost prayer that I just now found, so it's not my favorite. It's new to me, but that's good.
A: It is.
E: We will now hear from Jean Corey.
J: This is the prayer for Pentecost.
God, the light of your Spirit has fallen upon us. The seal of your ownership is on us. You have placed the Holy Spirit in our hearts, like tongues of fire it has renewed and restored. In our rising, in our sleeping, in our working, in our playing, in our joys and in our sorrows, your Spirit's lightness has dispelled the darkness. In our loving and caring, in our touching and our listening, in our thoughts and in our actions, God's Spirit has brought life out of death.

God, your Spirit, your Spirit fell like tongues of fire. It filled those that were empty and empowered those that were weary. God, your Spirit fell like tongues of fire. It brought together those that were divided. It reassured those who were afraid. God, your Spirit fell like tongues of fire. By it's power we can walk together as one. By it's power we can find strength to share. God, your Spirit fell like tongues of fire. By it's power we can find freedom in loving each other. By it's power we can find life in you.[52]

God's Spirit Has Brought Life Out of Death – *The Book of Common Prayer, 1979*

In her reading of the Prayer for Pentecost from the Book of Common Prayer (1979), Jean spoke of the light of God's Spirit. For so many people, Sue reflected that light. Her peace was irresistible. She would have said, like the prayer for Pentecost, that the Holy Spirit was placed in her heart.

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51 Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (n.p.: Back Bay Books, 1976), 153-54.

52 Prayer for Pentecost, Book of Common Prayer, 1979.

Sue was Presbyterian. She went to Cloudland Presbyterian Church and she loved it. She attended the Adult Sunday School before church. The Sunday after she died, we decided to visit her Sunday school class and attend the service afterwards. It seemed appropriate. My mother, my aunt Jean, my cousin Emmy, Sue's sister Anne, and Sue's niece Frances Anne went. It was a wise decision and I am thankful for that experience.

As could be expected, the Sunday school class was in a state of shock. Sue had died two days before and it didn't seem real yet. She thought she was healthy when she was with them four weeks before, and now she was dead. In *The Anatomy of Bereavement*, Beverly Raphael writes about death; "It may come when it is neither expected nor wanted. Its time is its own. It is always unknown and unknowable, mystery and uncertainty." [53] The month between Sue finding out she had cancer and her death was not long enough for anyone to process the reality of her dying. Some held out hope that she would live far longer. Those of us who were with her knew she would die soon, but it was too soon. Sue told counselors at Camp DeSoto to enforce bedtime no matter how much fun a cabin of campers was having. She instructed staff to "leave them wanting more" for the next day. After Sue died, we received a note from a former staff member. It said that Sue had followed her own rule and "left us wanting more."

The Sunday school class conducted the day's lesson and afterwards it came about that each of them started talking about what they remembered about Sue. I loved hearing the ways that other people outside of the Camp DeSoto community saw her. I also loved hearing how people who were more like peers thought of her because I mostly saw her in her relationships with people who were younger than she was.

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[53] Beverly Raphael, *Anatomy of Bereavement* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 4.

One man told a story that had happened recently, but when Sue was still alive. He and another member of the Sunday school class were playing golf. One man decided to fudge the number of strokes on his scorecard. The other man said, "Only God will know." The first man replied, "God and Sue Henry." She was a venerated woman.

Another man said if he had to choose a name for their Sunday school class, it would be "the obvious truth." He talked about how Sue would often begin one of her points with, "the obvious truth is…" He added that she would usually then say something that he didn't think was so obvious.

In the bulletin from that Sunday service, the prayer of confession mentioned Sue; "We thank you also for various persons who taught us by their lives, like our sister Sue Henry." The last line of the prayer read, "Help us know the better way and follow the kindly light through our Lord Jesus Christ." At the end of the bulletin, there was a small section about Sue. It read, "The congregation mourns the loss of our dear Sue Henry, an Elder of this church and revered Teacher of our Adult Sunday School Class. She was a 'kindly light' among us for many years and we all give thanks to God for her life and witness."[54]

In *Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, Sue Monk Kidd describes her "feminist spiritual awakening" and how she mostly saw men filling the leadership roles in her church as deacons and ministers. She questions how this experience might affect women in the church and the ways it might cause a woman to not feel included in her place of worship.[55] Sue was an elder in her church, filling the gender gap that dismays Monk Kidd. Also, the preachers at Camp DeSoto are

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54 "Cloudland and Menlo Presbyterian Churches" (2009).

55 Sue Monk Kidd, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman's Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine* ([San Francisco, Calif.].: HarperOne, 1996), 49.

nearly always women. These women usually have a prior connection to Camp as a former staff member, camper, or mother to a camper.

Many campers belong to denominations, such as the conservative Presbyterian Church of America (not to be confused with the mainline Presbyterian Church of the United States) that do not support female ministers. They argue that a female minister can be accepted as a spiritual leader as they are at Camp DeSoto, only because she is preaching to an all female congregation. (They somehow ignore the presence of Phil, the current director and a man.) I do not, however, believe that this was the understanding that led Sue to begin the tradition of choosing women to preach the Sunday sermons at Camp. I think her choice was one of many choices she made that allowed her to use the forum of Camp DeSoto to subtly prod young women towards greater critical thinking about their own position in society and their orientation to the Divine.

In one of the classes Sue taught on poetry at Camp, I came to know Emily Dickinson. Sue taught me "Some Keep Sabbath," the poem I read earlier in our service. Considering the context of Camp DeSoto, Sue's decision to teach "Some Keep Sabbath" could be considered a radical one. Some campers might have been uncomfortable with Dickinson's assertion that she could worship as well outside of the structure of a church as within it. This is another example of how Sue stretched campers' imaginations of how one might perform worship.

During our church service in Sue's cabin, I believe we were communally reading poetry as a solution to our circumstance. It's probable that Sue would have preferred to be at her church. In remembering her teachings, however, we were able to call ourselves to worship in a different way.

A few weeks before our church service, my brother John used another poem as a resource for comprehending our situation. He sent an email with a link to Alfred Tennyson's *In*

Memoriam to our family. Tennyson's poem provided a model for processing grief and the loss of a friend. As we individually sifted through its lines, many of us came to find articulations for our emotions that served as one method of healing. Even now, as I process the recordings and read through Sue's writing, I find myself better able to understand the experience through Tennyson's expression:

> So word by word, and line by line,
>
> The dead man touch'd me from the past,
>
> And all at once it seem'd at last
>
> The living soul was flash'd on mine.[56]

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On the last Sunday in Sue's room, a week before our visit to Cloudland Presbyterian, Emmy continued our service:

Reading from Scripture

…Okay. This is 1 Corinthians 12: 1-11, okay.
E: Should I read it?
J: Oh, that's a good one, yeah.
E: "Now concerning (this is 1 Corinthians 12), now concerning Spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uniform. You know that when you were pagans you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore, I want you to understand that no one filled by the Spirit of God ever says, 'Let Jesus be cursed,' and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit.

Now, there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit and there are a variety of services, but the same Lord, and there are a variety of activities, but the same God that activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by one Spirit, to another the workings of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of Spirit, to

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[56] Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam (Norton Critical Editions)*, Second Edition ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 69.

another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses."

A: I'm not familiar with that.
S: Yeah.
A: I don't remember 1 Corinthians.
Poppy (P): Is it? She's got that, The Annotated Bible. Is that sounding different in that?
A: Mmhm, that's probably it, I'm not familiar with that.
J: Do you want to read John or is that enough scripture?
S: That's good.
E & K: That's good.

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Closing Prayer

J: Okay, this is the closing prayer: "God, we believe you have sent your Spirit to live within us. Your dwelling Spirit leads us into all truth. God, we believe your Spirit teaches your followers to serve others. Your empowering Spirit equips us with gifts for your service. God, we believe your Spirit breaks down the barriers that imprison us. Your comforting Spirit encourages us to worship God with all our hearts. God, we believe your Spirit writes your law in our hearts. Your liberating Spirit sets us free to love our neighbors as we do ourselves. God, we believe your Spirit calls us to follow. God, we believe this is the path from death to eternal life."

"The Path from Death to Eternal Life" – *The Book of Common Prayer,* 1979

I would like to pause for a moment and reflect on a certain step of the path from death to eternal life: dying.

Dorothy Allison says, "Two or three things I know for sure and one of them is that telling the story all the way through is an act of love."[57] And this move is an act of love, for now I come to the stuff of my nightmares: the days when Sue was truly in pain. Thankfully, those hours were short, but they are seared in my mind.

In the two days just before she died, Sue experienced some awful pain. She could barely speak, she was mostly moaning. My aunt Jean, Sue's sister Anne, Sue's niece Frances Anne, and

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[57] Dorothy Allison, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (New York: Plume, 1996), 90.

I were with her then. Another friend of Sue's, Janet Shands, who had been on staff with my aunt, had joined us.

As Sue wailed, the other women worked to reposition her, but nothing made it better. The helplessness frightened me. I leaned against the wall across her bedroom and couldn't move towards her. Then Sue sat up, leaned forward in all of her pain, looked me in the eyes, and in perfect clarity said, "Kate, you're good."

The last thing I vividly remember Sue saying to me is, "Kate, you're good." It has meant everything to me. And I spent the next year not believing it. The year following Sue's death was the hardest of my life. I'm young. I turned twenty-two this year. But I'll cash in my chips early, and let it be the hardest year of my life. I went to a place of darkness and confusion where I have decided to not let myself go again. It doesn't seem quite like a decision you can make, but my mother did when she was twenty-three years old. She wrote about it in her dissertation.[58] She wrote about how Sue sat with her then for weeks and saw her through it. I found myself needing someone in the same ways this past year. Sue was that person for me as well. She saw me through that hard time in the same way that she did for my mother, but this time she had to do it from the other side. How can a woman be that powerful? That even in her death, she was able to save her goddaughter? Love is amazing. I wish to understand that.

When she said, "Kate, you're good," everyone in the room felt the power of the moment. Maybe she was thanking me, maybe she was comforting me, or maybe she was complimenting me. But as someone who was there and who has chosen to write honestly, I must say, it was something more. She was telling me everything I would need to know for the year I was about to

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[58] Jane Thompson Stephens, "Remembering Seems Wise: The Rhetoric of Women's Leadership" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2000).

face. She was teetering on the line between life and death, and some power beyond all of us allowed her to see me fully in that moment. And she had the strength and the love to tell me what I would so desperately need to know so deeply: that I was good.

Even in her dying, she continued to care for me.

Hospice brought us stronger pain medication. I was on the phone with my father, a physician, trying to figure out what dosage to give her. I wasn't ready to let her go, and I didn't want her to take too much medication and risk losing any moment of coherent conversation with her. But no one wanted her to be in pain. I wanted there to be a magical balance between comfort and connection with others. Like Mary, I hoped it would be easy.

The women around me listened as I relayed the messages from my father, and I know they sensed my uneasiness about giving direction about her medication. As the women waited with Sue in her bedroom, I passed back and forth between Sue's room and the kitchen where I spoke to my father on the landline. I felt that I had been cast in a position of great responsibility, and I can't say I was thankful for it.

It was then that every part of me realized, knew, that she was dying. Until then she had been dying alongside a thousand other happenings, but in that moment—dying was the only thing happening. And when there was only dying, my first full taste of that solid, opaque dying, I couldn't stand to be in the same room as it. I went to the living room, took a book off the shelf, and sat in a chair. I held her book, my book now, and wanted it not to be happening.

The other women, older and stronger than me, gathered around her bed, rubbing her and breathing in the pain.

Then Janet turned the corner to the living room and looked towards me sitting in Sue's armchair, my knees up, book opened on them. "Kate, is there any reason…?" She was asking me

to tell her why they shouldn't let Sue be out of her pain. Why shouldn't they let her stop moaning, wailing, moving more than she should have been able to? What could I have said? *It isn't fair. All of you have gotten so much longer with her than I have. Because I'm going to need her in the same ways that all of you needed her, except for me she won't be there. And I was just beginning to talk to her…*

"Kate, is there any reason…?"

I shook my head, "No."

~

But days before these terrible moments of pain came, we sat peacefully enjoying each other in communion and Jean continued:

The Lord's Prayer

J: Our Father in heaven, oh now we say the, say the Lord's Prayer. Okay.
ALL: Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us,
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
And the power, and the glory,
Forever and ever.
S: Amen
A: Truly Lord, we've seen your Spirit, right in this house.
S: Truly, truly.
A: Truly, we've seen it.
S: Over and over and over and over.

~

Hymn

J: Why don't we sing there's a sweet, sweet Spirit?
E: I don't know it.
J, P, & A: There's a sweet, sweet Spirit in this room and I know it's the Spirit of the Lord. There's a sweet expression on each face and I know it's the Spirit of the Lord. Sweet holy Spirit, sweet heavenly ghost, stay right here with us filling us with your love. And for these blessings, with our hearts in praise, without a doubt we'll know that we have been revived when we shall leave this place.
P: Y'all don't know that?
J: You don't sing that at Camp DeSoto?
A: As sweet as you could have at the church.
J: You never sang it at Camp DeSoto? Oh, that's so sad.
E: It's a little old timey for us, cause we go to the RUF hymnal now.
P: (Gasp)
S: Oh, me.
A: It's a new song, I'm not at all sure it's not, uhh…
P: 80's would you say?
A: Yeah.
J: We used to sing it all the time.
A: You know the…
J: Like during staff training.
A: …the land that I love, all his…
P: Oh, Gaither.
A: Huh?
P: Gaither, is it Gaither?
A: I think its Gaither something.
P: It could be.

~

Benediction

S: Father, over and over and over and over, you show us you. Over and over, we delight in you, Father. We're looking at you face to face. And we love it. We thank you that you have given us a fearless Spirit, that we know you; we feel a sense of you constantly. Thank you. Thank you. Father, I thank you so for these people who have walked with me through this and I thank you that I hadn't had to be the least bit lost. Father, you give us and we're grateful. I thank you for all of these people who have been a part of this life with me. In your son's holy name, amen.

A: That was beautiful. You were talking directly to him, I could tell.
S: I was.
A: Directly to him.
S: I love you.

A: It was beautiful. I love you, too. I tell you, a bushel and a peck. I do. That was a beautiful Sunday morning service.
S: It was.
J: The best I've had in a long time.
[PLAY CLIP 8 to listen to the recording of a portion of the previous section.]

"We Feel a Sense of You Constantly" - Sue

And I know now it was right to let her go easy. I knew it then, too. It was terrible, but it was right. It was selfish of me to want her to stay longer than she could stand to. She must have worked hard to be so present up until the end. Of course, I wanted more. She had shown me something amazing. She had pulled me with her as she drew closer to the spiritual world. Closer than I could have imagined. In the year following Sue's death, I found myself praying through her. I believe in God and the importance of prayer. I missed Sue, however, and for a while I just liked talking to her more. I didn't imagine that God minded. I wanted to hear her voice again.

But Sue had already been sure to tell me everything I needed to know about life, "Kate, life is good. And I don't think I knew it. I mean, I knew it was good, but I don't think I knew how good it is." Everything I needed to know about myself, "Kate, you're good." And everything I needed to know about death, "Fret not; it's good."

EPILOGUE

This past year, Aunt Jean was talking to me about my cousin Maya. Maya was a funny, quirky little five-year old at the time. Jean told me that one of Maya's idiosyncrasies is that she still talks to Sue. I said, "I talk to Sue."

Aunt Jean said, "Well I do, too, but not *out loud*." We both laughed.

"Oh yeah, that is weird," I agreed.

After Sue died, I had nightmares about her being in pain occasionally for the rest of the summer. A year later, my dreams had turned sweeter. A snapshot of one of these dreams will always stick with me. In the dream, I stood across from two of my heroes. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood to my left and Sue Henry to my right. In the middle was a warm glow. And I think I saw Gandhi in the background. It was the best image I've ever seen. I thought about it and decided how I wanted to imagine that. I was still mostly asleep as I teased out my ideas about what I had seen and began to tell myself a story, a narrative to accompany the image so that I wouldn't forget it. I decided the glow must have represented something like God. I pictured the way they were standing and oriented myself in their direction, so that made MLK the right hand man and Sue the left hand woman. I liked that. I want to remember that and keep it as my image of heaven. I told my friends about it. We all laughed. One friend told me that her gatekeepers would be Mariah Carrey and cheesy fries. Another told me hers would be her grandfather and Tupac Shakur.

When I told my aunt, she responded differently. She said, “I had an image, too! But I saw her with Oscar Romero.” Sue had made believers out of us. She led us to have faith in life’s goodness and great possibilities.

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APPENDIX A

Email from Kate Stephens to friends on June 9, 2009

Dear Friends,

I got back from Mentone, Alabama late last night. My godmother, Sue Henry, died peacefully in her home on Thursday, June 4th at 2:15 pm. I got to be with her for the last two weeks of her life and cannot even begin to understand the incredible privilege of being with her during that time.

Sue worked at Camp Desoto for 48 years, which is how my mom met her and then began working on staff for many summers. My aunt, Jean Corey, also came to know her through camp. My mom and aunt's mother died when my mom 16 and Sue never married or had children so they unofficially adopted Sue as their own mother and therefore my grandmother. Some of you might remember that I visited Sue for Easter and when my mom's stepmother died last fall.

We found out that Sue had kidney cancer the day that I got home from school, and it had metastasized to her brain and lungs. She had driven 7 hours to Jackson, MS to visit her sister, Anne. She had an odd feeling in her leg and went to the hospital in Jackson and that's when they discovered the cancer. She had no pain before then.

My cousins, the Coreys, arrived at my house the day after I did for an Amani celebration because the directors of New Life Homes in Kenya had come to the United States for a few weeks and were staying at our house. Also, my brother Rob's graduation from Chapel Hill was that weekend so my mom couldn't fly down immediately, but my aunt did. My mom went a few days later. My brother John also visited her that first week before going to South Africa. Rob

already had a trip to Mississippi planned so he visited her at the beginning, too. We had no idea at the beginning of how long it would be, and at first we thought she would live through the summer, but plans were constantly changing. My dad flew down next and I stayed to take care of Joe and Bui. My mom booked a flight for me at 4 am on Thursday, May 21 to leave that afternoon because Sue had one bad night of struggling to breathe and my dad was flying home that same day so we could switch places. I stayed with her from then on.

My mom had to come back home a few days after I got there, but my aunt Jean and I were with her the next two weeks. The first week we were in the hospital in Jackson. My aunt spent most of the nights with her and I slept at Jean's friend's mother's house (a very nice 85 year old), two minutes from the hospital. Other than driving her sister, Anne, who lives 30 minutes from the hospital and getting food, I spent most of that week in the hospital. My brother Rob visited again. She had hundreds of visitors. Then we moved to do hospice in her home in Mentone, Alabama for the last week of her life. My dad flew down to Jackson to make the trip to Mentone with us, she was in an ambulance and we followed in her car. I am so glad she got out of the hospital and back to the place she loved. My dad left after a few days and it was mainly my aunt and I again, but the whole time (in Jackson, too) there were lots of people showing up to take care of her and take turns spending the night. My cousin, Emmy, came to the hospital on the weekend when she didn't have to go to work and she came to Mentone.

Sue had one night of truly terrible pain on Tuesday, June 2nd so hospice brought her stronger medication. Watching and listening to her that night and trying to help her while we waited for medicine was an awful experience, but she was on a lot of medicine after that and pretty much comatose for the next two days until she died. It was hard to see her like that, especially because she had been so present to everything and everyone leading up to then. And it

was shocking to see her like that, but she was peaceful. But even in the last days she would smile and raise her eyebrows some. Apparently, the ability to hear is one of the last things to go even if you can't respond, and that seemed to be true.

The night before she died, my mom brought Joe and Bui down. She was planning on bringing them that weekend for camp, but fortunately she decided they could miss a few days of school and came earlier. Sue was not speaking anymore, but she said "Hi" when my mom called as they were driving down. We were worried that Joe and Bui would be scared to see her, but they wanted to and were fine. Her eyes lit up when they came in and she lifted her arms to them.

My family spent the night at my cousins' house down the road and came back the next morning. Then my cousin, Ben, took Joe and Bui back to their house. My cousin Emmy and I sang hymns to her that morning. Sue's niece had come from Kazakhstan a few days before, and she and Sue's sister were in her bedroom when she died. My mom, cousin Emmy, and I were in the rooms next to them (it's a small house). We all went in, more people came, we prayed, we sang "Morning has broken" (a hymn that Cat Stevens made popular and she sang it every morning in the hospital and when she woke up). It was very peaceful, and everyone was thankful that Anne was by her side.

It's surreal to think that a month before she was driving to Jackson with no concerns, but I'm thankful that she wasn't in pain for long and wasn't comatose for long. She only had one night of pain, she was surrounded by people who loved her, and she was in her room looking at the view she loved with her sister next to her. I am sad right now, but the experience was truly joyful.

The first thing she said to me when I arrived at the hospital in Jackson was, "Now Kate, you're nowhere near looking at the end, but you know, it's good." And she kept on being amazed

with how good life was and sharing that with us and everyone who entered the room (again, she had a LOT of visitors). Later she said, “Miracles have happened, I loved so many people.” It was amazing to see how many people she had deeply connected with, and she didn’t stop there. Even the ambulance woman had a hard time saying bye to her after the 7 hour drive to Mentone, and promised to send her pictures from her trip to Israel that summer.

We all had so much fun together in the hospital. She was hilarious the entire time. I took her older sister, Anne, to the emergency room one of those days because her hand was hurting and she has bad arthritis. It turns out it was gout, which Anne was mortified by because she’s super southern Baptist and she thought only alcoholics got gout. Sue thought it was the funniest thing in the world, and teased Anne about it from her hospital bed. She also fully supports Sotomayor, and liked discussing it with the nurses who held different political views. Every nurse and respiratory therapist, etc. came to love her. We left Amani key chains with a few.

She’s very close with the directors of the camp, Phil and Marsha Hurt. The Hurts, the Coreys (my aunt Jean’s family), and my family were listed as her godchildren in the obituary and are the heirs of her will. We had a small ceremony the day after and they’re planning a large celebration of her life at camp on August 8th, after camp ends.

I wanted to tell you guys all of this because it’s important to me that you all know about this. My life has truly changed in some ways. I’ve learned more in the past few weeks than maybe I ever had before. Her life was a model before, but the way she expressed love and her gracious spirit is imprinted in me in a new way now. I’m attaching what my brother, John, sent my mom because he captures the emotion of his visit and a lot of what I’ve been feeling. So much has happened and I’ve been completely absorbed in it over the past few weeks, so I also wanted to apologize for calls or messages that I’ve ignored.

Fortunately, Kaitlyn and I had put off purchasing our tickets because I couldn't commit to anything while I was still wondering about Sue and where I should be. Now I know that I can go to Kenya without regretting it, and we'll return August 5th so I can make it to the ceremony on the 8th. I got in last night and we leave in the morning. We'll have internet access in our apartment, so I'll be in better contact then. I thought of you throughout all of this, and there were many funny and profound moments that I wanted to tell you about along the way. I am so thankful for you.

I love you all,

Kate

APPENDIX B

Journal Entry by John Stephens from May 2009

...Most recently, Sue Henry was diagnosed with advanced stages of cancer. I love that woman deeply. It was my first experience with the grief that comes from death, and it weighs on me even now to recount it. I was scheduled to leave on this flight when we heard the news. So Mom and I went down to Jackson, Mississippi to see her in the hospital. Sue is from a town in the Mississippi Delta. She was visiting her sister Anne when she woke up one day in pain, after what had been a life largely absent of pain. The cancer was already very advanced, her decline quick. When we saw her, she spoke in terms of death.

She was beautiful then, as she always was. Her voice deep and resonate, hitting high notes with her Mississippi accent. Every word slid like silt from the bottom of the Little River out from her throat. She sent overwhelming pangs of peace into us even as we walked in the door to see her on what might be her deathbed. We want to move her back to Mentone; she wants to die in Mentone, on the mountain, the Highway Above the Clouds.

We are not sure if we can get her there. I think my dad is going to Jackson soon, and if anyone can facilitate her move it is he.

I want to talk about my time with Sue in the hospital:

She was skinny, but that had happened over the last two years or so. She was "a little loopy" as she reminded us, but loopy or not, her words carried more meaning than anyone else I've ever known. If she was confused, then it was only about things that had happened over the last 11

days. She had trouble grasping where, exactly, she was. At one point she turned to me and Anne to say,

"Ya'll, if you repeat this, I'll swear you lied, but I *hate* being in Jackson."

Neither of us mentioned where we were. But, for any "loopiness" she was completely herself: she wholly lifted up every person to walk into the room. It is an indescribable gift of hers. As far as I can tell it is the ultimate goal every human being should have for their life—to bring such comfort, joy and wisdom to everyone they meet. This she does; even as the cancer in her lungs and on her brain not-so-slowly take her way from us. Perhaps "gift" is not the right word – calling, divinity. Who knows but those who have experienced it? Luckily, we are many.

The hospital room was as nice as a hospital room could be I suppose. It will not be a tragedy if Sue can't make it to the mountain, we love her in a hospital in Jackson equally as we do on the Mountain in Mentone. I had a sense I needed to say something; to not leave unsaid what I'm sure was already known. It was getting late in the evening. Mom had turned the TV on. I began to sputter out a speech. When Mom realized that I was trying to have a moment, she turned the TV off. Sue heard me out. I told her, broken, she was an elder figure for me, the elder figure for me. That I loved her. That she was the model I knew I could look to for how to live a life wholly. At least that's what I think I said – or meant to say, I'd never cried out of grief before.

Sue said, "Well, that's good."

And she said she loved me, and I meant a lot to her. The next day she added,

"I don't want to get all gushy, but the Stephens and the Coreys have just meant a lot to me over the years."

She's meant a lot to us. She showed us how to live.

What I mostly don't want to forget about the day is the image of Sue, and, mainly, the way she made me feel. I hope I can someday do what she did for me for someone else. Of course, Sue was a complete person unto herself. Independent her whole life. She spent many hours reading. I didn't realize it was an appropriate choice until later, but I picked up Moby Dick on the way out the door to catch the plane to Jackson. It was one of her favorites. I remember my mom telling me about how she would read it in her cabin or room, I'm not sure where, every year for a span. Anyway—I picture a yellow couch, a lamp, a room screened-in like a cabin at camp, but more solid somehow. The sounds of summer in Mentone are in the background; moths swarm around the light outside, patting the screen softly. Enough time spent like that will enrich the soul, perhaps allow someone to make another person feel important, full of purpose, like they have something vital, vibrant and meaningful to do in this life. That's what Sue did for people. I can't quite grasp in words how she does it. It isn't a skill to be learned, like how to tie a lanyard. Nor is it exactly a talent to be cultured, like how to ride a horse or play an instrument. It is a way of being, a possession of self; it is an acting-out of deep thought, prayer, reflection and love, mainly love.

APPENDIX C

Email from Emmy Corey to friends and family on May 17, 2009

"Sue Update of Sorts"

Hello all,

I've just returned from staying with Sue for a while and needless to say, there were many emotions. Watching Sue for the past 30 hours or so has been a surreal experience to say the least. All things considered, she's doing pretty well. She was pretty alert and with it when I was there. She also claims that she hasn't felt any pain—just slight discomfort. Though she has been lying still in her bed for the past two weeks, there seems to be so much movement in her anyway. It's almost like watching someone getting ready to go out of town and they are thinking of last minute items. "Did I lock the door? Did I feed the cat?" She seems to be taking inventory of everyone and everything around her. Her eyes will kind of wander around the room, stop on the clock for a little while, move to the window and then rest on your face for a bit before closing for a quick nap. Occasionally, she would say things like "Em, Jack's doing alright isn't he?" or "Em, your Dad's pretty happy up there in Pennsylvania, isn't he?" or "You mom's a special kind of woman, isn't she?" I suppose that's not any different than normal Sue questions, but they seem to carry a bit more weight now and you can feel the deep love behind each one.

One by one, Sue went down the list of people we love and shared the ways in which she is grateful for them and how deeply invested she is in each one of us. At about noon today, she made sure Anne and I stopped what we were doing so that we could pray for John's summer in South Africa. By now, most of us have heard her talk about how at peace she feels and how she's

"led a good, long life… 79 years isn't too bad." And though I'm grateful for that, I've never been too concerned about her peace. If anyone can deal with death gracefully, it's Sue Henry. Though I felt better to be with Sue, I still felt restless, heavy and sad. It was a little uncomfortable to be open and vulnerable with a woman who is going about the work of closing out her life. I wasn't sure what to do or say.

Leaving her was the hardest thing I think I've ever done. I drove back to Birmingham around 5:00 tonight. After fifteen minutes, I almost had to pull over and get all of my sobs out. But, I kept on driving and answered phone calls from Mom, Dad, Ben, a few friends, and Chad. Once all of the phone calls had subsided, I drove on an overpass and looked down to see some of the most gorgeous green pastures that the Southeast has to offer. I thought of Sue riding in the passenger seat of her car down the same stretch of interstate in a few weeks to return home. I thought of all of the people that will make the same trip to see Sue and I thought about how much love that woman brought into this world with her. All of the heaviness passed for the first time in two weeks and I couldn't help but be grateful for the beautiful ride she is going to have back to the mountain. I love you all and Sue does, too—that is one thing we can know with certainty and be all the better for it.

Peace,

Emmy

APPENDIX D

Poetry Sue selected to teach at Camp DeSoto to campers in 2005 and 2006

Human Family & Still I Rise by Maya Angelou

How to be a Poet (to remind myself) by Wendell Berry

Incident by Countee Cullen

I Many Times Thought Peace, The Sky is Low, The Grass Has So Little To Do, & We Never Know How High by Emily Dickinson

X by John Donne

Fire and Ice, Nothing Gold Can Stay, & Mending Wall by Robert Frost

Digging by Seamus Heaney

The Pulley by George Herbert

Daybreak in Alabama by Langston Hughes

Yet Still by Rashidah Ismaili

Waiting by Jane Kenyon

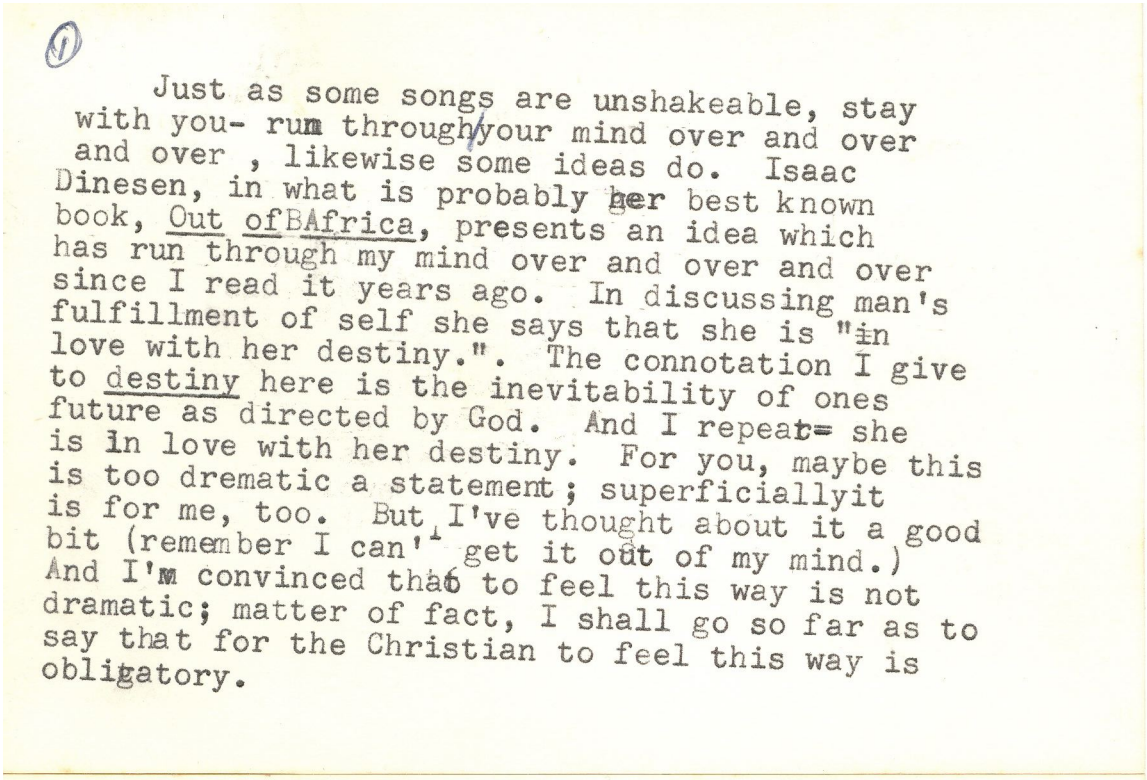
Ars Poetica by Archibald Macleish

Silence & Values in Use by Marianne Moore

Open Windows & The Coin by Sara Teasdale

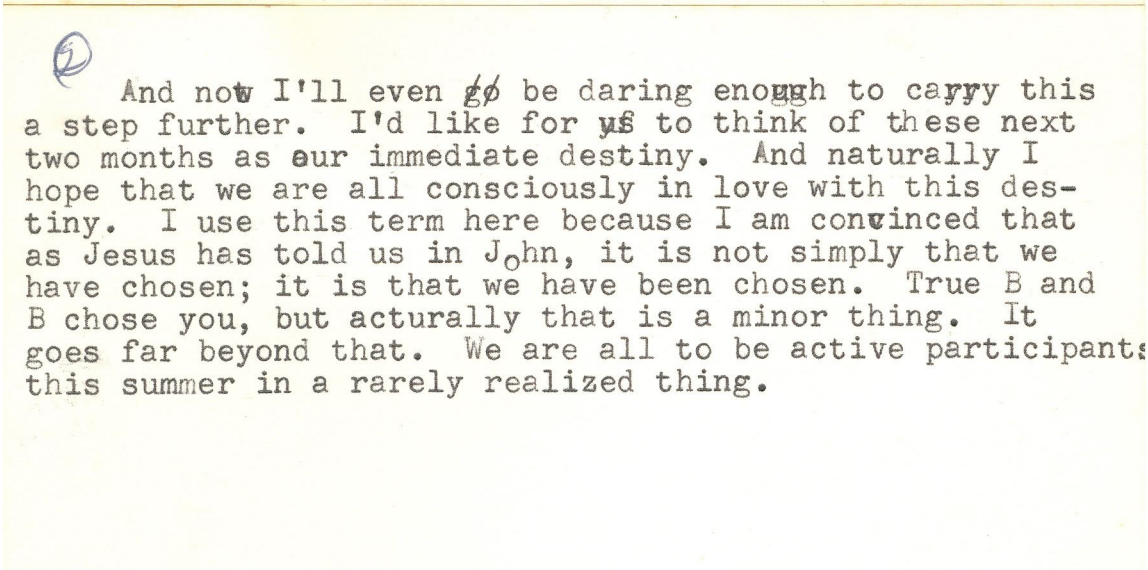
APPENDIX E

Note cards from talks given to staff at Camp DeSoto during pre-camp training in 1963
Following the images of the note cards is the text in standard form



(1)

Just as some songs are unshakeable, stay with you- run through your mind over and over and over , likewise some ideas do. Isaac Dinesen, in what is probably her best known book, Out of Africa, presents an idea which has run through my mind over and over and over since I read it years ago. In discussing man's fulfillment of self she says that she is "in love with her destiny.". The connotation I give to destiny here is the inevitability of ones future as directed by God. And I repeat= she is in love with her destiny. For you, maybe this is too drematic a statement; superficiallyit is for me, too. But I've thought about it a good bit (remember I can't get it out of my mind.) And I'm convinced that to feel this way is not dramatic; matter of fact, I shall go so far as to say that for the Christian to feel this way is obligatory.



(2)

And now I'll even be daring enough to carry this a step further. I'd like for us to think of these next two months as our immediate destiny. And naturally I hope that we are all consciously in love with this destiny. I use this term here because I am convinced that as Jesus has told us in John, it is not simply that we have chosen; it is that we have been chosen. True B and B chose you, but acturally that is a minor thing. It goes far beyond that. We are all to be active participants this summer in a rarely realized thing.

(3) Staff-163

I would like to read to you a passage which seems to me to be particularly applicable to us as we go into this summer. Though it was not written for us it seems to me that it still deserves our careful attention.

I have read this section from Of the Imitation of Christ to you because it is exctiting to me how very relevant to our own situation is this advice of Thomas a Kempis, a 14th c. German Augustinian monk. He is addressing this section to the men of a monastery; yet why are we not just as real a religious community as they. We shall serve as they served, but unlike a monastic order, we shall serve by our contact with mankind. We must serve. Admittedly Thomas a Kempis was a great religious. But a far greater authority has given us clear directions for serving. And now I read to you from the Gospel according to St. John. Jesus is speaking to us as he says:

John 15

(4) Unless we acknowledge tonight, with the magnitude of the realization, that we are in truth a religious community directed to serve by Jesus himself, we are not recognizing the extent of our summer's job. If you are new, you talked with ex-counselor's before you came. They told you, we hope, that it was fun; they told you that you would love it, and certainly we hope you do and we expect you to. But if anybody told you it was easy, she told you a story. Physically it is not easy. At times mentally it is not easy, emotionally there are times when it is not easy, but most of all, spiritually it is not easy. There are no times when it is easy spiritually. Possib I need to clarify this statement. It is difficult only to the degree that you realize the scope of our summer's operation. Frightfully enough, there may have been counselors hwo have passed through who have never been conscious of what a spiritual strain counseling is. We pray there is no such counselor here tonight. Because, of course, if you do not find

(5)

this summer very difficult for you spiritually you will surely fail us, you will fail your children, and of paramount importance, you will fail God.

Let us return to the idea of a religious community. The base of the word community is, of course, common. And obviously a religious community has religion in common. By its very name it emphasizes the spiritual side of life. D. Boehnhoffer, a German theologian and a Christian martyr killed in 1945, has written a very fine book on the Christian community entitled Life Together. And again, this may be applicable to us. He says, "Christian brogherhood is not an ideal which we must realize, it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our fellowship is in Jesus Christ alone, the more serenely shall we think of our fellowship and pray and hope for it."

And now it seems to me worth our considering in what way we may participate in our Christian Communi-

(5B)

It would be negligent of me not to call to your atttention the fact that this coin, however, has another side. I don't need to tell thinking people the obvious thing, but I am comforted by being articulate about it and I hope maybe you are comforted by hearing it. For all of the difficuly of the spiritual aspect, there is the reward, the fulfillment which comes only through spiritual wrestling. I venture to say that if this summere is a spiritual strain for you, you shall reap its benefits manifold. We can't depend on man to fulfill in this way; we can depend on God and isn't it wonderful that we can.

(6)

ty. And we must begin by realizing that participation is an active word, not a passive one. What is our individual part in making this a Christian community. And more to the point, what can we do, we leaders in our Christian community. You remember that Thomas a Kempis tells us "Thou must learn to break thine own will in many things." And how true. We are all, horribly enought, selfish. Too often we would all choose for life to be ordered around our wishes and desires. Our general reaction is to think of those around us only insofar as they do not interfere with our own pleasures, our own wills. We , often, with eagerness do for those we love thus making ourselves happy, but are slow to do for others because there is no personal gain to be realized. For us to do our part toward establishing a truly Christian community, we must begin tonight to acknowledge our own selfishness, and with God's help to break our own personal will for the gain of the many. You surely know enoguht about

(7)

young people to know a prime rule--you can't fool them. Don't decide tonight that you will do your very best to put on a good facade of unselfishness; it simply won't work. Throw yourself into this with such dedication to God and such dedication to the good of the girls that you haven t time to follow your natural instinct to think of yourlself first. Until we can, to a very real degree, lose ourselves, we can certainly not do our part in making this a Christian community. And you have been a part of group-living enoguth to know that even one person out of harmony with the aims and intents of the group can destroy the atmosphere which accomplishes what we all want accomplished.

We could generalize for a long time about breaking our will for the good of the group, but let us, now, deal with specifics.

There will be many times when you are so tired, when you feel that you deserve time with your fellow counselorswhen for the good of one little girl, you will sacrifice these things--for the little shy girl who needs reassuring, for the child who is the most

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There will be more times than you can imagine when your unselfishness will be vital to the harmony of all of us who are working together. Of course, there will be many times when you will need to carry more than your share of a load because someone is sick, out of camp, or even possibly--and this is the horrible part--because someone is simply negligent.

09

But it is in rising even to such obligations that we prove ourselves to be dedicated to something above ourselves. We can not afford to forget, even for one minute, that we are in something which is far bigger than we are.

The truth is that--as Thomas a Kempis has put it"Here no man can stand, unless he humble himself with his whole heart for the love of God." Consider this--"no man can stand"--can meaning able to-- and stand being the posture of dignity, the posture man takes when he is able to present himself in a favorable light within the community--but note here under what circumstances a man can stand--only if he humbles himself with his whole heart for the love of God. And again Thomas a Kempis has Jesus' own words to uphold him. Remember his words"For the plain fact is that apart from me you can do nothing at all."

We go through life asking why to almost everything. And here of course, is a sound reason for the type humility which acknowledges complete dependence

9 10

on God. And the Phillips' translation of John has made it bluntly clear to us--"For the plain fact is that apart from me you can do nothing at all." And if, right this minute, each of us will admit this with all its implications--to ourselves, and if we would start each day with a reaffirmation of this--our battle will be more than half won. The first step, it seems to me, must be admittance of need for Him. And then the next step must be a conscious, constant effort to make our communication with God so real that our strength will be all that we need so that our direction will be right--not, of course, because of anything within us--Because of Him.

And then, naturally, we ask again Why. But we know why ---Because "I have loved you just as the Father has loved me. You must go on living in my love." And it is pretty wonderful isn't it? That we not only have the opportunity to but we have been instructed to "live in His love." And more than this. We have the opportunity and obligation to show others how to live in His love. Yes, we hope you teach your

11

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